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2012-03-30

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Recommended Citation
Mencher, Marie, "Gertrude Reif Hughes Oral History Interview, Mar. 30, 2012" (2012). *Wesleyan University Oral History Project.* Paper 3.
http://wesscholar.wesleyan.edu/oralhistory/3

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Interview with Gertrude Hughes by Marie Mencher, Wasch Center, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, March 30, 2012

MARIE MENCHER: We're here with Gertrude Hughes on Friday, March 30th. We're at the Wasch Center for Retired Faculty and this is an interview for the Wesleyan Oral History Project. We can get started, then.

GERTRUDE HUGHES: Good.

Mencher: Can you start by telling me a little bit about your early life: Where you were from, what your family was like?

Hughes: I was brought up in New York, New York City. I was born in Holland, but because of the Second World War—long before your birth; I was about three—we moved to New York. February 1, 1940, to be exact. Which saved our lives. You wouldn't know, but that's a very thin set of months before Holland was taken over by the Nazis and occupied for many years thereafter. In the end in Holland, there was no food, and many people had been murdered.

I grew up in New York, and went to the Rudolph Steiner School there, which is a Waldorf School.

Mencher: What was that experience like?

Hughes: Wonderful! I have loved the Waldorf School education my whole life. Most people who go to Waldorf Schools do not then become interested in anthroposophy, but I did. My parents already were, which is why they sent me and my two sisters—one older, one younger—to that school. It's very special. I don't know if you know about it, do you?

Mencher: I have a preliminary understanding of it, but if you wouldn't mind elaborating, that would be great.

Hughes: In any Waldorf school, there is a sense that children are completely unique---which is true of everybody, of course---and should be treated that way. On the other hand, there's also a sense that each year, between the ages of six, let's say, and puberty, let's say fourteen years old—represents a distinct stage of development for every child.

For instance, in the very first year, you actually take your foot, put a crayon between your big toe and the next one, and you trace in a little tray of sand on the floor the letters that have been written on the blackboard. You also try to make your own name. G—for Gertrude, it's <u>very</u> hard to do! I can still feel how difficult right this minute as I tell it to you. They take plenty of time for stuff like that.

And they have a wonderful principle that hearing a story is how children learn. So there are many ways that oral narrative is used throughout the first four years of elementary school, let's say through age nine years, through fourth grade.

In the first grade, I'm sure, you learn the alphabet. But you absorb it through a narrative. You are told that there was a king who once did great things, the story unfolds and then you see a "K" on the blackboard, never mind trying to write the "K," but you have been given a mental picture of a king with a crown, and very straight back, holding a scepter in one hand, and stepping out neatly with one leg, and you can see the king. <u>You</u> can see the king now, right, just listening to me? Good. We <u>hear</u> that king, and we find out about his castle and his battles and the land he rules.

And we never have a test on this, or anything like that, but we are progressively introduced to words and spelling and narrative. The child really feels that she or he has come, not just into a family, but also to a place of--I will call it---truth. This could be only my own view, but that's not bad, actually. It's not the kind of process where the teacher gets to say, "Now children, how many kings are there in America? Do we still have kings? And why is that? That's right, no."

That is not what is done in the Waldorf School. There are many things that don't have anything to do with counting all the time. Not that we don't have wonderful arithmetic stories—unbelievable: Algebra! you had to be there. In first grade, it is established that one can write, and one can read. And writing is very physical, because everything is very physical for any child. Nobody sits—well, we sit listening to stories, but the children also just stand up and move right around the classroom.

Mencher: And they're allowed to do that?

Hughes: No, no, it's really more under control than my description there. They're asked to march about because they have learned a poem about K for King. Usually there's a poem or a verse or a song that goes with the story, that goes with the intellectual material, which, at six, we don't think of as intellectual but think, as I said, as the truth.

So, yes, we don't stomp around in the class; we only do that at recess. Do you know New York City?

Mencher: Somewhat; my grandma used to live there for a long time.

Hughes: So you've been to Central Park and you've seen 79th Street. The school is right there, and there is Central Park, just across Fifth Avenue. Where we could play Capture the Flag, and play King, or anything. Which brings me to another thing about the Waldorf School, though I'm still only in kindergarten and first grade.

Of all the anthroposophical attributes, play is one of the most important. Whether it's for children who have developmental problems or not. Waldorf Schools have their own subsidiaries called Camp Hill. Worldwide, there's a Camp Hill opportunity. All those schools are the same as Waldorf, except that they're tailored to the needs of those particular children. Yet they are still unique, and they are still into the truth in a big way. So, in the park, we played with what we knew.

The point I'm making is that play for children is the work of children. And that is nowadays becoming very fashionable, but it is also very not done. You know people who are always worrying: "Oh my God, my children are just always going from one thing to the next. They're all nervous, and they all have allergies, and they can't get to sleep. They have to have three lights on, or they have to have a drum in the background until they—well, I think it's pretty wild.

But then again, I'm just not into that. I'm the the mother of four children and the grandmother of ten children, and I must say that ours just went to sleep. But my children are fifty now.

Okay so, the idea that play is work doesn't mean that they should be playing all the time; they are learning through all activities! The emphasis on being human as a very special thing that we give to each other. Not only because we're older or younger, but we just do in many ways. That is basic in the Waldorf Schools.

What they themselves say is: "We have age-appropriate— [I can't stand that language]—age-hyphen-appropriate activities." But what that means is, if you're seven, you don't get to do what the nine-year-olds do, and if you're nine, you don't get to do what the seven-year-olds do, because you're a different person each year---except that you're not. Because you're still yourself—because of the great paradox of the great uniqueness of all of us, which is the only thing that's true of all of us, so it also is true for children.

So age-appropriate something or other, and the arts: painting, hand-work arts, like knitting. All first graders knit—boys, girls, everybody. And what they knit is something to put their recorder in. You know what a recorder is—a brown wooden flute.

Mencher: Ah, yes.

Hughes: You can make a very crummy sausage-like thing, and still put that recorder in there, and you have made something with your own hands! Those arts, whatever those arts are called, as well as the fine arts, are extremely emphasized all

the way through high school, never mind through eighth grade, and certainly in first grade.

Mencher: You mentioned that the teachers, or the philosophy behind the system, stresses the truth. Where does this truth come from?

Hughes: The children think of it as truth. And where does it come from? It's a science that doesn't exclude spirituality. But it is basically a science, also, that doesn't exclude art. And so the story can tell how a cloud is made when water—I'm not in first grade anymore—when water gets sucked up by the warmth of the sun, by turning the water and the sun into sentient creatures. Every once in a while, you have to have a story.

The truth is not against anything. It's not to be measured, as truth really isn't, you know. If you could measure the truth against another truth, then you could never know it.

Mencher: Well, perhaps it could be interesting to hear how you personally related to it, or how that informed your own life philosophy, or your early education?

Hughes: My whole early education—my whole life, actually is just perfect for me. But the perfect part of the Steiner school for me was that everything was deeply interesting. Everything was deeply harmonious. And I loved my teachers. Almost all the Steiner school children love their teachers. It's acknowledged worldwide. Rudolph Steiner spoke about it when he was living and starting these schools in 1919, in Stuttgart, Germany, which has nothing to do with my experience, except it wouldn't have been there if he hadn't started them. It gave me an appreciation for beauty and an appreciation for knowing—the love of knowing. Not knowledge as it's already made, but knowing, if you see the difference.

Mencher: Indeed. Can you talk about your college? When did you attend and where? And what did you major in?

Hughes: I went away to high school, a Quaker boarding school called George School. That was because there was no high school yet in the Waldorf School in New York City, because it was all just beginning when I came to New York.

I went to George School. Loved it. Loved being away from home. I was terribly homesick, but I loved being free. It was a co-ed school, I should add, that was part of the freedom that was very important to me. Also, it was a very fine springboard for getting into a good college.

There was never any question that I would go anywhere except to one of the Seven Sisters Schools, the most respected of the women's colleges. Because that was what you could do. You couldn't go to Yale, you couldn't go to Harvard, because they didn't have women yet. You couldn't go to Wesleyan; they didn't have women anymore. So I went to Mount Holyoke, which I liked very much.

I thought it was mostly beautiful. And, again, I liked my teachers---more than my friends. I had friends, but I don't know—probably because of the Steiner School experience, it was my teachers I really trusted. Trusted that they were telling me the truth when they told me something good.

I majored in English and adored doing it. I wasn't very good at it. In the Quaker school I went to, I think I didn't really get it. It was so easy compared to the Rudolph Steiner school, because in Rudolph Steiner school you have to make your own text book.

Mencher: Oh, wow.

Hughes: Everything you learn, you make into a book with a story and drawings. And if it's science, you draw a picture to illustrate how the water evaporates, or how something experiences chemical change. And it doesn't have to be perfect, but it has to be nice. And your handwriting must be neat. Some of these things are changing now. Anyway, I wasn't particularly good at those things, but I put a lot into it. Well, to compare, even if you go to a good regular high school, they say:

"Okay, we're going to read to page fifty, and tomorrow we'll have a little quiz about the material." I didn't know how to do that stuff!

Mencher: Yeah.

Hughes: So while everybody seems to have been satisfied with me, and I had good grades, I didn't feel I learned that much. But I learned a lot about people, and about being in a community, because I didn't live at home. And I was popular with the kids; I was in the student government.

But in college, I suddenly realized, "Hey, what you have to do is write well!" And I made myself write well. It didn't take long.
And they loved that, of course, as you well know. That's important in college. Still, I have to say that I didn't learn to write as most students do who come here. They say: "Oh, yeah, I went to Loomis, and I really was glad I did, because I learned to write." George School was at least as nice as Loomis, but I've never really thought about the work there the way I thought about the Steiner School. So, yeah, I learned to write. I wrote my first really good thing about Virginia Woolf---a novel of Virginia Woolf's.

At Mount Holyoke, we, all the frosh, had to read one book. The book for that year, in fall of 1954 was Cardinal Newman. I bet you don't know who Cardinal Newman is.

Mencher: I don't.

Hughes: John Henry Cardinal Newman was a great writer. I thought it was dry stuff, and yet it was truthful, and very real. We read him in order, I suppose, to be confronted by rather sophisticated thinking. And I had never read anything like it. So I was somewhat innocent, but I wasn't stupid---and some people thought I was imaginative. (It's not true, really; it's just that I hadn't been knocked around yet.)

So I made my way by being imaginative. When I wrote about John Henry Cardinal Newman, it wasn't particularly good, but I won a prize for "most

improvement." And I somehow knew that I was catching on. You know, I had always been the absolute top of most classes, and if there had been As or Bs and Cs in our Rudolph Steiner school, I would have had As. And in George School, too, I got great reports.

I was always treated with quite a lot of respect by teachers in my life. Partly because I kind of figured out how to survive in the world of smart people. In academia.

I had learned in an indirect way at the Steiner School, and more traditionally at the George School. At Mount Holyoke, in the spring of freshman year, I wrote a really good paper. It was about *To the Lighthouse*, by Virginia Woolf.

I was learning about the technique of learning, as well. I went to the library, and I didn't understand whether you were or were not allowed to read about things that you were studying to learn. So when I went to the library, and thought I might be cheating, I did it anyway. I knew that the central character in the novel just sits and she feels like "a wedge in the darkness," and the lighthouse is booming into her, and I'm thinking "what is a wedge," and "why 'booming.'" But I learned about what critics said about Virginia Woolf, and about modernists, and what they thought about *To the Lighthouse*.

And then I set it all aside. I did not take any notes, but I wrote what I understood, and put it in the paper. I felt that I knew it; it was just like hearing the story in the Steiner School: "Okay, so this is the truth; you can write that." And I got excellent comments in the margins.

And so, I was just liberated--in the real sense of liberal knowledge. I was told that my writing was really improving, and later I won an award called the Merrill Prize--I think it was fifty dollars, and I was pleased because I didn't understand that it was only for improvement. Still, later, when realized, I said, "Oh, well, okay."

Mencher: And can you continue by talking about your road to becoming a professor here at Wesleyan? How that worked out?

Hughes: Of course. That’s a very strange and very blessed road. At Mount Holyoke, I had written my thesis on Jane Austen--indicating that I was capable of sustained academic inquiry. I didn’t think it was very good, but I got *magna cum laude* for it. My parents read it and they didn’t think it was that good either. They were very intellectual, artistic, wonderful people; they were not American, and they each had very good educations in major universities in other countries. I think that their way of seeing what I wrote at that time helped me see that it wasn’t much. But it was absolutely fine with me to have *magna cum laude,* I thought that was great. I was also Phi Beta Kappa, which really impressed me, because it indicated that I had knowledge outside my own narrow field of study.

So, that was pretty great. Then I went and married an Amherst man, someone I had known since I was a sophomore, and who I had “been with,” as we say now, since I was a junior. He was three years ahead of me and had a job at Stanley, which is a famous hardware company in New Britain---which is practically next door to Middletown. He had an apartment there, and I hung out in it quite a bit---rather more than I should have, perhaps. The point is that we had an apartment in New Britain, and I felt very sophisticated about it. After graduation, we married in New York and I moved in with him.

We had a tiny, tiny wedding, because I didn’t want a real big wedding in the country. My family had a big house in the country, but I wanted it in New York for various reasons. I wanted a particular church, and I wanted to fit in a visit to the Metropolitan Museum (we’d lived right across from it when I was a child). My parents gave the wedding breakfast, which was of course a lunch, in the wonderful Stanhope Hotel.

Then my husband and I flew off on our wedding trip, because—though he was not a wealthy person at all—he had bought an airplane.

Mencher: Wow!

Hughes: He and I flew up to Canada. It was just a little flap, flap thing. A Taylorcraft it was called, but they don't exists anymore. It certainly wasn't a personal jet.

So our marriage started right after graduation. I was by then 22, he was 28. He was also an English major, but not very good at it. He didn't care about studies.

Starting in 1960, we had four children in five years. Three boys and a girl, Lucy. And thay are still alive and wonderful, and I have ten grandchildren.

My husband and I soon figured out how very different we are from each other. We had to figure out how to proceed: He sort of went his way, I went mine, but not immediately.

I was very busy with the children. I looked seriously into what Steiner wrote about young children, and I tried to establish those things at home, and to find them in nursery schools and kindergarten schools that my children would finally go into. But nothing like that was going on here, and in fact I'm the only anthroposophist who has lived in this town, except for two very short times. I remember thinking I would have to be a Rudolph Steiner school teacher as well as mother with my children.

Mencher: Did that ever feel isolating?

Hughes: Well, isolated—but, yes, it was terrible, because I had no one to talk to about it. I'm used to that anyway, because nobody wants to talk about truth without saying "Well, how do you know?" And very few people, really, are interested in art as a way of thinking, let's say. It's changing now, but I was alone in a lot of ways in that marriage. But it went on for twenty-three years. In those twenty-three years, those children were born, reared, made ready for college. In the end, all but the youngest made it through. She didn't quite; she started at Mount Holyoake, actually, and she hated it.

So, in those years, I realized that I wanted some employment. I was drudging, of course---four children in five years is a lot of work--though I truly didn't mind that so much. But I thought: This isn't me. This is me helping them,

and that's great, but I'm—also me. What am I going to do? I found out that you could get an MAT, a Master of Arts in Teaching, at Wesleyan. And it was very good in those days, and one of the three, I think, that were terrific on the East Coast. Brown had one, and Harvard had one. So, when I was pregnant with my third child, I had been substituting in the high school here, teaching Spanish; that was fun.

I didn't even mention it earlier, but this is important: My first job was before those children were born. The minute we were married, the minute our airplane brought us back to Brainard airfield next to Bradley Airport—I started as a twelfth grade English teacher at Cromwell High School. Cromwell is a town up the road from here---so small that their Graduation ceremony had always been held at Middletown High. But a new school had been built that year, and it was the first year that the seniors had graduated in their own town.

I taught twelfth grade English to everybody from people who couldn't spell their own names, to people who probably could have gone to Mount Holyoke---and in fact did, because that's how I got that job.

But I had to find out a way to get to Cromwell. I didn't know how to drive then, so I had to learn in a hurry.

This job was very hard for me, because I had never been in a public school in my life. I didn't even know the—what's that thing when you go like this?

Mencher: The Pledge of Allegiance.

Hughes: That's it. I didn't know the "Pledge of Allegiance." I had never seen a school that was like a public school, let alone a little public school in a very unsophisticated town.

Hughes: But of course, I loved the students. Always do. And they liked me very much. But I was very wrong for the job in many ways. I had 125 students. I mean, that's just ridiculous! I loved to teach writing. They really need it. But I couldn't keep up! And so, by Christmas, I had to leave. I had gastritis—some sort of

beginning of an ulcer. And the doctor in New York, whom I had had as a child, and I still knew, said, “You know, you really can’t do this. You have to leave this job.” So I left the job and felt wonderful in about two months. When they needed a substitute, I went back to the school and taught the tenth grade, which was easier, and I had a better head for what they needed. I just did it badly, and that was exactly how you’re supposed to do it. Who knew?

That’s how I began teaching, and then those children were born, and when the third one was going to be born, I had already started subbing. In April ’63, I got a job for the rest of spring at the Woodrow Wilson High School in Middletown; I got that job just by showing up.

So I’ve basically just been lucky. Then my pregnancy began to show, and I was told that I could finish the year, but after that I couldn’t come back. They were so sorry, they’d love to have me, but nobody is allowed to show in Connecticut. It was still a Catholic state—yeah, imagine that!

Mencher: Oh, my gosh!

Hughes: I don’t know what’s so Catholic about that, but in any case, women couldn’t drink at a bar yet, either.

Mencher: In Connecticut?

Hughes: In Connecticut. You couldn’t get within x number of feet.

Mencher: You couldn’t even go inside?

Hughes: You could go inside, but you couldn’t stand at the bar.

Mencher: Not at the bar? Wow.

Hughes: When I was a waitress—not then, but in high school, I learned that first, but it continued to be true when I was a young twenty-x year old. Back to teaching: I really loved it, and I knew I was going to do it. So we were broke, because my husband and I, of course were completely ignorant about the practical aspects of life. And I was spoiled; I thought that every human being, every man, every husband, just had theater tickets in his pocket, and gave them to you.

Mencher: Of course!

Hughes: But it turns out that's not true, and I learned that we really had to govern our finances. Turned out that was something that was not easy or even palatable for Bob; that left me. And I wasn't bad at it, but basically, I just didn't know enough. Also, my father had died, and I realized that he would have been our bailer-outer if he had lived, but he hadn't.

And now I had my mother. She was from a different ethic—she did a lot of work, but she didn't work for pay. When I learned that I couldn't go on teaching, and therefore couldn't earn money, and therefore couldn't afford the person who came to help with the children, I thought, I know what I'll do. I'm not that great a teacher, but I can learn how to teach.

I see myself in a red maternity dress that I had borrowed from one of my really good friends. It was completely straight and had huge white buttons, but you could still hide a big belly in it. You know, with the third pregnancy, you don't have five months before you show. I know people don't care about showing now, but in those days, it was considered distasteful, almost sinful, to flaunt it. All very stupid. You can see what made a feminist of me already!

Mencher: [Laughs]

Hughes: Absolutely. So I remember going up to that late Victorian or Edwardian gingerbread house on the corner of High Street and Washington Street. Beautiful old building.

That was the Master of Arts in Teaching office, just that year. So I put on this red dress, found out where Mrs. Calhoun was, walked in and said, "I would like to join. And how much is it?"

They told me it would be five-thousand dollars, which was rather a shock, but somehow I organized it. In fact, the University gave me a loan. And they were very happy to have me. I could see right away that there was something just right about it all.

That summer, I went to English classes and other classes; because you did your Master of Arts in Teaching in your own field---English, History, Science—so you really worked on subjects you liked yourself.

Mencher: Okay.

Hughes: I loved it. I met George Creeger that first year, who became a good friend when I finally was hired here, many years later. Geraldine Murphy was the first woman who became tenured here. She had her Ph.D. from Harvard.

When I finished the MAT, I had two more children, the one who was expected, and the last one, Lucy, the only girl. So I couldn't attend every year, but I persevered, so that I did a one-year Master of Arts in Teaching in three years. And in '66 I was hired by Wesleyan.

Dick Ohmann, a young Turk, as one used to say, left Harvard and came here too. One thing he wanted to do was teach students writing in an interesting way, and for this he needed many, many writing teachers for small classes—twelve or fifteen in a class, I think, which is still the case. They didn't have enough teachers, knew that I was finishing MAT, and asked if I would like to be one of those.

Hello! Would I ever! I said, sure, and I did it, well enough. And after five years, I was able to pay Wesleyan back the five thousand I owed them.

Mencher: Oh, wow.

Hughes: And still pay the people who were helping me at home. It was much easier to teach than study, because you just have to be here for an hour and a half, and that's it!

They don't care that I might have five people throwing up at home, so long as I could get to class on time. Also, the children were growing, going to kindergarten and so on, so it worked. And I loved it.

Every Monday, we had a staff meeting, and there were all these English teachers who were also teaching for the young Turk. None of them were my friends, but they were going to be. We had to come up with ideas for assignments---I had some that turned into a course later on.

Joe Reed was in that group, and Geraldine Murphy. And then there were some others who later marched for Martin Luther King and didn't get tenure, and were gone. I don't really mean that the one follows from the other, but that is the way it was. I couldn't go, of course. I led a really circumscribed existance. I didn't even really experience the Beatles. Because I didn't listen to radio music, and I certainly didn't watch TV, and I certainly didn't allow my children to watch TV. I still don't think I would if I started right now. The point is that we didn't live that kind of life in our funny little domestic hive.

So, I got that job, and I did that job. The children understood that I had a life of my own. I also began meditating regularly, something I began when my father died, immediately. And there's a wonderful meditation method I learned in the Rudolph Steiner school, about concentrating your attention. Almost all meditation is that.

Right now, I'm writing a book about the Steiner system that includes thirteen of those exercises, and a long introductory essay that I'm having a hard time with. It will be published, I think, next year by Steiner Books. That is a company that mostly publishes books by Steiner that have been translated from German. There are many hundreds of books that he wrote. Six thousand lectures—

Mencher: Wow.

Hughes: —which became books, because the lectures were learning cycles. And about thirty-nine, I think it is, free-standing books.

When I was twenty-six, Daddy died. I had two children. I understood that my mother had always meditated. She had withdrawn each day for about twenty minutes, and you knew that you couldn't go into that room then for any reason. I knew what she did, and now, I was doing it. I felt very grown-up, but I also felt I was getting into a very hard time in my life. I hadn't even hit thirty yet. I didn't know I was going to have a very hard time in my thirties, and terrible times in my forties. But at that time I meditated almost every day, and now I have meditated almost every day for almost fifty years.

It has been wonderful to have an access to my own best self, an access really to spirituality. Most people think of religion when they think of spirituality. But Anthroposophy is called "spiritual science" by Steiner.

Mencher: I see.

Hughes: All the physical sciences and all natural sciences are all about the measurable world, right? And that is their problem, but it is also their magnificence. There is no way that the sciences, since Newton, and certainly since 1901, haven't bloomed. It is incredible, what we know as scientists. Or even what we can read—Lewis Thomas and the cell, I mean. It's gorgeous; it's amazing.

What has not kept up, however, is a study of the supra-sensory world. And that's where I'm interested---in spiritual science. That is the area that our eyes don't see, our skin doesn'to touch, our ears don't hear, but we have other senses that can be developed. And that's been true since Buddha, the Gautama Buddha, and perhaps some earlier people. But Gautama Buddha is pretty early for us. It's about what, six thousand years before Christ?

So, turn of time, with the beginning of the birth of a god into human body for thirthy-three years—he lived sooner, but he was Christ, what is called Christ, for thirty- three years. That took eons to happen. And then in our year zero (which really should be seen as year 33), he gets to die, which is a huge thing. And

the only reason he could die was that he had trained himself to stay in a body, which he didn't have to do. We have to stay in our bodies until death takes us out of them each time, and we have to get into bodies in order to come to Earth, too. But this was something that He was able to will, along with the Father God, and the Sophia God, depending on how you chose to call them yourself. But he was the only god that has ever come to Earth in order to die, that is to say, in order to be human. And it was very hard to do, apparently.

I'm sure I don't know how hard that would be, or how triumphal. We know about the three-day Easter, but we don't hear much about Holy Saturday of that weekend. In the three-day Easter, on Friday the god was crucified; on Sunday, the god was resurrected.

What happened on Saturday? He went to hell, and saw all of the people who were there for eternity. And he explained to them what death is, and how we can be redeemed, and that his mission is assuring that.

My point in saying all this is that at twenty-six, when I began finding my vocation really, and concentrating it, my ability at paying attention was pretty good. I'm a head person. I mean, person who works from her head. But because I went to a Steiner school, I learned a different kind of learning. I didn't get very smart, which was a great release for me, from intellectuality that's so tiny. All you guys get A's, and you roar ahead into the world. But you don't know how to stop and look at something, Well, you stop and look at the sunset, and that is not very hard. And yet, we don't do much of it. But you stop looking at the surface level.

Well, at twenty-six, I began to see that I needed to educate myself in a different way, things were getting pretty hard and recalibrating would help me not go crazy. And that's what I did. I know now from reading Steiner how much help comes from the heavens. Also, I was facing the death of a person who was very important in my life.

My point, I guess, is to try to tell you how important it was that I meditated. I never could talk about it, because people don't like to hear the word Christ; people don't like to hear the word God at Wesleyan. Now they probably do, but it simply wasn't done then.

And I think I'm also not brave. I'm getting braver. I just felt that it was so sacred that this was true—and that nobody would understand. That they would say, "Well now, that's very nice, and really soothes you, is that right? Makes you feel like you get a good night's sleep?" No. You know, it's much harder than that. But it's not hard—it's not this [smacks table] kind of hard. Supra-sensory is a word that wasn't there then, the whole new age hadn't happened yet.

Mencher: Um-hmm.

Hughes: It was just starting; although it's from the sixties, it was only starting in the sixties and it went right through 'til Reagan.

Well, I had my mother; I'm not saying how much she and I did on the phone about Steiner, and about second coming, and you don't want to know this—and I really shouldn't joke about that. But these are very important things, and if they can't be discussed in an interview like this, there's no point in talking about it.

I started a study group here with my mother, myself, and Elizabeth Ormsby, a professor in the Master of Arts in Teaching, who adored me, and I adored her back. I worked with her for fourteen years, right through my thirties and up to forty-two. It was very strengthening for me, to know I was still my mother's daughter and I could ask her anything.

But at the same time, I was getting sad that my husband and I were no longer close. And he was more than sad; he was really very disappointed in us. But we hardly talked about it. It seems to me that we didn't have the courage to split up, and we would have been crazy to split up with four little children. You just can't do that. We weren't that kind of people.

So---now I'm thirty, I have a Masters degee in English, and I have finished my MAT degree. Supposedly, I can now teach at Wesleyan.

Dick Ohmann becomes one of the people working on Noam Chomsky's transformative grammar—I think that's what's it's called.

Mencher: Universal grammar, perhaps? I know it has to do with the idea that once you are born, you have the capacity to learn any language, and once you start learning, the concept of grammar is similar.

Hughes: It has to do with semantics. It may indeed be called universal grammar. It was probably Dick's latest book then, but it's certainly not his latest book now. And Dick knew Chomsky, of course. Still does. These people must have been so young. But then, so was I.

Anyway, I loved that part of my life, even though I now can see how hard it was. Luckily, I didn't really know.

Mencher: Were you lonely?

Hughes: You bet, but I carried on. I think people considered me courageous, but it wasn't courage—it was really pride. I was not going to admit that I was getting a B- in marriage, you know, getting that grade from my husband. And of course, he was getting C+ from me, mind you.

He hadn't worked for quite a while by then, and things were really getting bad. But I was working here, which gave us some stability. He became interested in compost: he got some really good manure, and made a lovely compost heap. If you put your fist in, it was just as warm as I don't know what, which means it was doing its work.

I was sitting here in my office trying to finish my book, so that must have been quite near the end of our marriage. Well, I'm rambling. You wanted to know about my path toward becoming a professor. The path was that I loved writing, I loved reading, and I loved teaching writing. And I was pretty good, though I got better at teaching reading, which takes some doing--as you well know, I'm sure.

Mencher: Yes.

Hughes: Because you're an English major?

Mencher: I'm actually a Latin American Studies major.

Hughes: Are you really? So you have to read Big Time over there.

Mencher: We do. And a lot is in Spanish, which is still very difficult for me. I started taking Spanish from an early age, and I was interested the interdisciplinary idea of it, because it's like history and politics and literature. And I wanted to study abroad.

Hughes: And did you?

Mencher: I did. I went to Argentina.

Hughes: How great. Well, I guess I shouldn't try to interview you.

Mencher: Yes, please go on.

Hughes: So I'm thirty; I meet the English Department; I learn how to teach writing in this wonderful way—that we were all doing it together. It's just amazing! One of the things we did I later turned into a course. Early on—it may have been Joe Reed's idea, but perhaps it was Dick Ohmann's—we decided we should have everybody writing letters. Dick suggested that we show the students how to write a letter of refusal, as though it came from the Admissions Office.
The idea was to introduce them to the uses of language and tone of voice, how to manipulate vocabulary, making words be kind or cruel or funny.

Mencher: How—can you elaborate on that a little bit?

Hughes: Well, you would say thank you, we're so glad that you wanted to come to Wesleyan, and it's very, very sad that you can't come, but you know, we aren't

accepting students from Connecticut this year, or something. Of course, you would never write that! It's a kind of paradoxical, or ironical use of language is perhaps the best way to say that. The students competed with each other in being suavely cruel.

Mencher: And what was your next step forward professionally?

Hughes: I got my Ph.D. It was difficult. Very difficult. But I loved it! I'm always saying that, but it's true, I don't mind hardship. Anyway, in the beginning, I only did the Monday two-hour meeting with Dick, and all the people that were my age, actually, or younger, but were in the faculty. They called me that cute little Mrs. Hughes.

"Oh, there she is, that cute little Mrs. Hughes." Too funny. I wore perfume, and Geraldine and I were the only women. In 1966, there were no women, not really until 1973. And there were only very few black people, or anybody else of color. But admitting blacks was the big deal in '67, I think. I was absolutely in awe of the way the University went out and actively recruited from all over the country—certainly the East Coast and South. It was an exciting time, but often worrying and troubling. There were people who brought guns to Fisk Hall Building. One person I know for sure was on parole.

Mencher: My goodness.

Hughes: And I was very naïve again. God, it's amazing, isn't it? Here I think I'm quite a sophisticated person. But I had a lot to learn.

Well, my point is that in the first year, I learned to hang out with faculty--though it took a long time for me to think of myself as a faculty member.

But then, I learned to teach and think about writing as something that you can teach, and in order to teach it, you have to do it fairly well yourself. Which I was doing. I knew how to correct papers, and I spent a lot of time, much more than

I would now, writing comments in the margins. Some teachers just say “excellent,” or “needs more,” and don’t elaborate or explain what is needed.

Mencher: Yeah. [Laughs]

Hughes: I was not that kind. I would say, “If you put this at the beginning and then took that next to last paragraph and put that next, you could have a really interesting argument;” or, “Watch out for arguments. You need to have examples. Here’s a good one.” I mean, I spent a lot of time---though some people couldn’t read my handwriting! I learned a lot from that work; it’s like learning to be an editor.

If I had not been hired here, or had not been able to get tenure, I would be an editor now, probably, earning much less than a professor earns, but certainly I would be decent at it.

I did have an earlier connection with Wesleyan, actually. I went to a “pajama party” at Psi U when I was a freshman at Mount Holyoke—you don’t want to know.

Mencher: I won’t ask.

Hughes: Oh, boy! So I knew this place a little bit. Years ago we were looking for a place to rent in Middletown. There’s a place where Long Lane meets Long Hill Road, and on the northeast corner sits this little tiny brown gingerbread house We went to look at it. It was owned by Miss Caroline Hubbard, who was from a very old Middletown family. It was May, and I wore my white blazer that said Mount Holyoke 1958 on it. Miss Hubbard saw that and just grabbed me by the lapel, and said, “Am I seeing what I think I’m seeing? Mount Holyoke? 1958? That was my fiftieth anniversary. I was at your graduation!”

So we moved from our old place into this little cabin. We used to freeze to death in there. And you could have it for—I don’t remember the amount of money, but something that we could afford, though we did spend a lot of money on heat.

I knew that this was kind of unusual, but I felt as though the heavens were smiling on us, and that Miss Hubbard would probably be nice to us.

She died, about four years after we were ready to leave because we were going to have our second child, and there wasn't room for two children. We also thought that we needed to own a house. So we did.

After she died, a good friend of ours, William DeLana, who was a well-known lawyer at a law firm in Hartford---Day, Berry and Howard. He called us up, and said, "Guess what? Miss Hubbard has left you something." It turned out that the whole one-thousand-and-something that we had paid her over those years, she had willed to us. So we had lived there rent free!

Mencher: Wow. Wow! That's amazing.

Hughes: Very sweet. She really loved us. And I didn't love her as much as I feel I should have. I do now, though. But I gave the money to Bob, and he bought a Mercedes with it. Not a good idea!

Mencher: No.

Hughes: That'll give you an idea of how we were.

On another note: I was thrilled about that time to meet Elizabeth Ormsby

Mencher: How do you spell—?

Hughes: O-R-M-S-B-Y.

Elizabeth Ormsby was a lecturer here, which tells you that she didn't have a Ph.D. She was a psychologist, a brilliant woman, much beloved by most people. I waited a year to start in the MAT program because she was away the year I originally meant to begin.

I learned psychology from her, and she learned anthroposophy from me. Her course was about education. She said, "Now, I would like to speak about schools—

the schools you went to. Did you go to schools where they cared about the child more than the program, or the program more than the child?" She probably put it better, but everyone was raising their hands.

I raised my hand, too. I said that what she described was just like the Rudolph Steiner school, that there the children come first--but that they're not spoiled. And after the class, she said, "How interesting. I've heard of the Rudolph Steiner school. How nice that you went to it," or something like that.

I went to her office hours, told her about my new baby, and how she was a bit much for me, and I thought I wasn't really caring for her enough, and hoped she wasn't neglected. A lot of stuff just poured out of me. She wasn't that interested in mothering, but she was in many ways like a mother to me. I think she was a real spinster; strong, set in her ways, firm. Within a very short time, I absolutely loved her. And over the years, I realized that she loved me. That was a great honor, to be loved by her---and also just a terrific fact!

Mencher: I understand.

Hughes: So I had two mothers for a while, and I needed both of them! I bring up Elizabeth Ormsby because during the Sixties at Wesleyan, I was learning how to teach writing. I did it skillfully and very carefully, writing good stuff in the margins, as I've already told you. I was also learning about about politics in the wider world, and about social upheaval.

She knew much more than I did. She was much braver, and she had far more students. She lived in Niantic, it's a good hour away. She was very spiffy: arrived every day in a gorgeous yellow car, and she stayed on campus until 8 p.m. She knew everything about issues and troubles at the University; when things were going well or not well for the early black people in the dorms, for instance. She listened. Many of those students in those days felt isolated, but they could talk to somebody who would listen.

And that wasn't me, because I was being very professorial, I was only wanting to be smart, and I wanted to get home to my children. I was wrong in that,

but I listened to what Elizabeth told me. And Anthroposophy helped me as well. Anthroposophy gives us many tools to improve ourselves. One is a series of five exercises, one of which teaches you positivity. You manage yourself so as to not criticize everything all the time, to notice how much you're criticizing.

I am highly critical. I come from a highly critical family. This was good, but it wasn't as good as learning restraint and positivity.

You make a contract with yourself---you can write it down—to examine the bad traits in your character and set a time frame within which you will try to correct them. You are critical of yourself.

And this is where Ms. Ormbsy comes in. We were reading about these exercises in a study group, reading Steiner's teachings on them. Elizabeth had this great way of saying something, teaching you so that you never lost it. "Well, another way to put that," she said, "Would be: *keep looking.*" And so I wrote 'keep looking' in my notes, and I suddenly thought: "Oh my God! I just said all these nasty things about my good students whom I love. And I don't see them as nasty." And I asked, "how do I keep looking?"
And now I'm always thinking, "Yes, keep looking. That's what positivity means."

It's a really deep thought. Essentially: "If you wait long enough, you can be optimistic." Those are some of the things I wanted to describe for you because I wanted to make Ms. Ormsby come alive for you.

In the end, she became very, very ill—emphysema. Elizabeth Ormsby died on Christmas Eve, 1978. A very holy thing, to get to die on Christmas Eve. She had been very ill for five or six years, since she smoked her head off. I did, too, in those days. I only ever smoked ten cigarettes, but still, I did do that most days. We could actualy smoke in class then. Sit there and teach.

Mencher: Oh, yeah?

Hughes: It was unbelievable.

Mencher: I'm sure a lot of people appreciated that, probably.

Hughes: They did, but it was unheard of soon after that until about five years ago. And now of course, wherever you go, everyone's smoking. Don't do it! You don't do it, do you?

Mencher: I don't.

Hughes: Good for you.

For five or six years Elizabeth Ormsby was in and out of hospital: more in than not. She had seventeen admissions, and I went to visit her whenever she was in. Her very beloved partner, life partner, Marjorie Daltry, who is still living and is Marjorie Rosenbaum now, would always say to Elizabeth Ormsby: "You can do this."

She needed a lot of things brought to her, and I thought of good things to take. And our wonderful intimacy continued, and I continued to learn a lot from her, even after she couldn't talk. I think she was one of the greatest friends I ever had, certainly it was the greatest friendship that I have had in my life so far.

Moving on. When I was 35, I realized that I had paid Wesleyan back, and that my teachers had said to me, "Here, why don't you publish some of this?" and, "Why are you getting a Master's? You should be getting a Ph.D."

So, I thought, okay, I'll get a Ph.D. I'll apply to UConn and Yale and Columbia. And then I thought, No, this is asinine. I'm much too much of a snob to go to UConn, and Columbia is pretty far away. Yes, I could get a train, but I have to be home most nights, I have to be home to cook; I have to go to baseball games; I have to bring these children up. So, why don't I just try to go to Yale? If I can go, I'll go. If I can't, I won't.

Well, damned if I didn't get in! It was fabulous. I didn't think of trying to ask them for scholarships. I don't know if I would have gotten one, frankly.

I called my mother, and I said, "This is going to cost X per year for many years. I think I can do it in five years," which---because she was able to do what I asked her to--I absolutely did. Did the coursework, did the passing of the

coursework, and then wrote the dissertation, which has to be a book. At least for Wesleyan, it has to. That time I wasn't thinking of Wesleyan, I just thought: "I'm going to learn a lot. I'm going to be a Ph.D.; something will happen."

My mother had a very wealthy brother who probably helped her be so kind to me. After my mother died, her generosity also helped us buy a boat, which worked out wonderfully for the children, and really wonderfully for the marriage. All of a sudden Bob Hughes had something really unique and his own, and all our children became sailors. Two of them have their own boats now, and they all have won many races. It's really been a big thing for everybody but me. I liked sailing, I liked the sea, I didn't get too sick, and I liked doing things together. But there were too many evening drinkers for me.

Meanwhile, I was teaching here. They needed me. They wanted me. But they would fire me half the time, and then they would re-hire me. Seven-hundred fifty dollars a semester to begin, and then it got to be better and better. When I went to Yale, they were still asking me.

When I went to my interview at Yale, I met Marie Borroff. (The only woman who had been tenured at Yale—that's all different now.) I told her: "You know, I probably can't go full time. I have four children; I have a job at Wesleyan." She stayed calm and just listened, then said: "Well, let me look into that, because I know that people are not allowed to attend part time except in the sciences." Well, damned if she didn't put this before the Humanities Board, and she told me in my second and last conversation with her, that yes, I could come on whatever schedule I needed in order to do it at all. Turned out I actually did attend full time, and finished much more quickly than other people.

Mencher: Okay. Wow.

Hughes: Do you want to continue? Because I have to go in about two seconds.

Mencher: Oh, sure, no, no, no. We can stop there, actually.

Hughes: Yeah, we can stop there. The point is that she got me in there in a way that allowed me flexibility and time. And I did my dissertation on Ralph Waldo Emerson. Who was, then, the very thing that Harold Bloom, who's still alive, and very famous, was teaching. I took those courses. So that's how I got to do my PhD in the second half of my thirties, by going to New Haven three times a week at the most.

So, I'll see you again. Shall we email about when it's going to be?

Mencher: Yes. Yes, that would be great. Thank you.

Hughes: You're welcome.

Mencher: Okay. This has been an interview with Professor Gertrude Hughes at the Wasch Center. We have concluded for the day.

[End of Recording]