



*the
Lesbian,
Gay,
Bisexual and
Transgender*

Religious Archives Network

*A resource center and information clearinghouse
for the history of LGBT religious movements.*

Oral History Interview: Virginia Mollenkott

Interviewee: Virginia Mollenkott*

Interviewer: Doris Malkmus*

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Transcribed by: Teresa Bergen

Doris M. This is Doris Malkmus interviewing Virginia Ramey Mollenkott on September 25, 2004 at her home near West Milford, New Jersey. Virginia, first of all, thank you very much for agreeing to leave your story and a record of your experiences with the LGBT Religious Archive Network.

Virginia M. You're very welcome.

Doris M. Would you like to begin by telling us a little bit about yourself? Maybe from your childhood?

Virginia M. Well, as I look back across my life, I have the feeling of looking from a very wide open perspective, which I feel I have now. A very liberated and happy perspective; although there were difficulties in my life. But I'm happy [now]. And I'm looking back toward something that gets narrower and narrower and narrower. In fact, I had a very vivid dream once that I was coming down the birth canal, and when I saw the lights of the birthing room, I also saw the face of the devil grinning at me and saying, "You're a damned soul." And that was really the story of my early [childhood]. I feel that [for years] I was working on healing those early many damages. As a child I was taught that my heart was deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it? Meaning that I couldn't know myself, so that whatever came up out of my heart I had to question

and doubt. And consequently I was quite afraid of myself. Even in high school, still afraid to go to bed with myself, in a way. Because I'd been taught my proclivities were so terribly damaging and dangerous. By then I knew what to call it; I knew to call it lesbianism. But in my childhood, it was just general sin. And yet, I was taught that Jesus loves me. And that's what they should never have taught me if they didn't want me to have my subsequent career. Because that stuck, too. I mean, the part about the sinfulness was awful. But the part about being loved by somebody, that was also very important. I know my mother and father felt they loved me. Looking back at it, I think my mother came from a family in which there were decades of abuse. I have no proof of that except the personality of my grandmother, which I remember well, and her sister, my great-aunt Agnes. And I think that there was just abuse that ran right down through. And they didn't know any psychology. They had no idea of who Freud was or what, you know, what his psychology had opened up about early damage. My mother, once, when I was in my, well, just before she died, said to me on the phone that no one would ever have hurt me while she was around. And I just saw a flash of red, because if anybody hurt me, it was she. She did ritual abuse, ritual, (pause) she had a little ritual around whipping us for the smallest of [errors]—we had to go and get the strap and bring it to her. And you know, trembling all the while and crying. I caught her laughing sometimes when she would be beating me with it. And so this, of course, caused a confusion about love and pain that I had to work through later, in later years with my lovers and with psychologists and so on. And work that out. And then she also, there was also some sexual abuse in my infancy. One time in conversation when I was adult, she said that a child whose parents had been murdered, and the child was found crawling around the dead parents. And she said, "It's a good thing the child wasn't three. Because they remember things after they're three." So I said, "Well," in my mind, I said, "Well thank you, now I know when you stopped and I know why you stopped." Then she proceeded again when I was in my puberty. Tried to reinstate a relationship.

And my brother was in the next bedroom, so I just said very loud, “Mother, don’t!” And she was too afraid then to pursue it. But she had sold the twin beds we had and made me sleep with her. Which I have discovered was a very bad training for being a lover. Because when I’m at odds with my lover it’s very difficult to sleep in the same bed. Very, very difficult. (laughs) I feel like, “Aargh, you know, I don’t like you and now I have to sleep with you!” Which is an old pattern. It’s not about the person that I’m with. Fortunately I do know some psychology, so I am able to understand that much. But that was the dark days of my childhood, and I really had nowhere to turn. I mean, there was nobody. My grandmother was difficult, my mother was difficult. Withdrawal of affection was her chief punishment, other than her little jollies that she got. So I knew better than to say certain things or do certain things. And I knew not to go to my grandmother because she was so difficult, and my aunt was so difficult. I used to watch them holding hands on the porch with any missionaries that came. The lady missionaries, they always held hands with. It was a very same-sex, erotic environment that I grew up in. And actually it was a matriarchy. Because my grandmother ran the show, but, theoretically, it was a patriarchy. So theoretically, any boy, even, could tell his mother what to do because he was male and she was female. But in reality, I was seeing very different things. So from the beginning I was having experiences that I was told I wasn’t having. (Laughs) You know? And I had to learn to live with this tremendous ambiguity. What I know is happening, I don’t really know that, that’s not really what’s happening at all. Of course, any abuse survivor will tell you that that’s part of it. But it wasn’t just that, it was the theology as well.

Doris M. It must have been especially confusing when your father left.

Virginia M. Yeah, he left when I was nine years old. And I remember walking with him the night before he left and pleading with him to come back to God, and come back to

us. And now I, I came to understand before too long that he did what he had to do to survive. And I've also found out that there was no sex from the time I was conceived. And it was as much her fault as his, because she wouldn't have sex unless he wore a condom. But it was as much his fault as hers, 'cause darned if he was going to wear a condom. So you know, he met another woman in a bar. And by golly, they were together for the rest of his life and he lived to be 100. I always heard that woman referred to as a whore. And in recent years, I would laugh to myself: "Some whore," you know, she'd been faithful all those years. (laughs) As her son told me the other day, on the phone—he lives in Florida where she's in a nursing home now, he said, "You know, my mom had such a rotten first husband. My father was such a rotter that when she found a good man, she never let go." And he was a good man in many ways. (coughs) But he was gone, and I certainly did plead with him. And mother. . . I think the worst thing, people have asked me about divorce and so on, and what it does to children. See the worst thing for me was that my mother told me he left *us*. That it was about *us*, that he didn't love *us*. That was a terrible thing to say. Of course, she couldn't handle looking in the mirror and saying well, you know, it was about her and him. You know? So when I had to divorce Fred, that was the first thing I told Paul: "This is not about you. This is between me and your father. It has nothing to do with you. You didn't do anything wrong. You didn't cause this in any way." And it's my advice to anybody who's getting divorced. Because the children will take the blame if there's blame rolling around. But there was no confusion theologically if that's your question, because it was wrong. Divorce was wrong. You made your bed, you had to lie in it. So he definitely went away from God in my mind at that time. And so I lost him totally. And I'd lie on his bed and cry for him.

Doris M. How did you feel about—

Virginia M. He never hit me, see? He was at least safe. He ignored me when it was convenient, but he never hit me. And that was a big thing in my life, because everybody else did hit me. (laughs)

Doris M. I wonder if there was any sense of judgment of him. That you carried a sense of judgment.

Virginia M. Oh, yes.

Doris M. Or how could God have let that happen to you?

Virginia M. (Pause) No, not that. I never consciously had any sense like that, against God. But I certainly felt that Dad had done wrong. And of course my only feedback was from my mother. So according to her, he would have let us be in the street. He left some debt. He also left the only properties he owned, so she was able to sell them. But even so, she was still left with some debt which my uncle bailed us out from, but the story I got was, "He doesn't even care if you're living on the street." And indeed we had to move down into the tenderloin district of Philadelphia, where I was one of maybe two or three white kids in the class. And sometimes I was the only white kid in the class.

Doris M. What was that like?

Virginia M. That was, well, I'd never even seen black people before. (laughs) It was an all-white suburb I lived in, up in Olney. So there I was plunged, you know, in a place where I'd look out the window and see somebody urinating against the light post. And you know, I saw fights and things I just never dreamed of before. And at school, the teacher I got happened to be the wife of the principal of the school I'd just come from. So she knew my story and she felt very sorry for me and she was

very nice to me. And of course the black kids saw it as white favoritism because she was white and I was white. Also, it was the time of the race riots in general. In Philadelphia, there were race riots at that time.

Doris M. Could you say more about when that was?

Virginia M. Well, I would have been, what, nine? Ten? I was ten, maybe.

Doris M. World War II?

Virginia M. Yeah. Well, 1932, 1942. It was in the Forties. And, so one day I came out of school after rubbing the boards for the teacher, you know, erasing the boards for the teachers, because I was, you know, teachers' pet. And there were at least 100 black kids out there. And they grabbed me and bent me over backwards. It was well orchestrated. There was one very big, I would now say dyke, black woman, girl, who bent me over backwards. And then they all had lead pipes and they pounded the hell out of me. On my stomach and ribs, I still have pain there, and, more discomfort. I always try to keep that covered somehow, lean on it. Anyway, I finally—I think they'd have killed me—I finally saw a way back into the school. I got loose from her for long enough to run back in there. And then they were afraid, of course, to come in there. But we never pressed charges. My mother never took it very seriously.

Doris M. Your mother didn't take it seriously?

Virginia M. No, no. No, no. No. No. My mother essentially, things were for her comfort. I mean, even when I was a child, she had to win every game or she would be upset. So I knew I had to let her win, always let her win. Wasn't good training for being a lover, let me tell you. A woman, you know. (laughs) It's not good training for

the tendency to let the other person win. And she just never, if I got sick, she would be very upset with me. Cause I was causing an inconvenience. So I learned to try to hide if I was sick, or hide if I was hurting. Hide that fact from her, because I didn't need to deal with her upset with me in addition to whatever else. (tape shuts off, resumes)

Doris M. A truck. . . but you were saying that your mother needed to win.

Virginia M. Yes, she needed to win. And she needed to have things done for her convenience. So she did not take it seriously that I had been beaten so seriously. She did not take me to a doctor. She did not have anything taken care of. So.

Doris M. What did you do with your own sense of terror around that?

Virginia M. I kept a stiff upper lip. In Transgender Journeys, I talk about the fact that I had adopted a very male mode of handling my grief and pain, which was just to keep a stiff upper lip. You just didn't talk about it. And you didn't think about it if possible. And you didn't cry.

Doris M. But there were no friendships for you in this school.

Virginia M. No. No.

Doris M. No alliances?

Virginia M. I did finally develop a friendship with one black girl. But I didn't have her yet [at the time I was beaten]. I used to go over to her place in the projects where she lived. And she was very sweet to me. But no, I didn't have anybody yet.

Doris M. Would you describe your childhood as lonely, or were you—

Virginia M. Yeah. But there was one little girl across the driveway that—our houses were row houses. And there was a drive down the back that people come into for their garages. We played on that driveway—and this little girl lived across the driveway and I was in love with her from the get go. I was about the same age as she. Mary Lou. And I would have walked through fire for Mary Lou. So when she moved, though, I was really quite lonely. I played mainly with the boys. Of course that was, no intimacy there, just rough games and stuff. They admired me because I defended my brother, who was very effeminate. So when people would hurt him, I would fight for him. And they would say, “Oooh, she lands a hard punch!” And I was very proud of that. But he didn’t return the favor. He loved to see me get hurt. (laughs) One time my mother was going to whip me, and he told her to wait until he went out and got some neighbor kids to watch. And she waited till he got the neighbor kids to watch so that I could be a public spectacle. So it was kind of—they were both born on May 15th and I was an Aquarian—so we were just on two different wavelengths. So in a way, he and she were always the close ones, until the last four years of her life. And then she was my mother instead of my predator. I had four years of good times with my mom. But no, I didn’t have any friends to turn to. And she didn’t take me to the doctor. So I guess that’s why maybe if it had been treated, I wouldn’t have this. I think they were probably very badly bruised ribs. And it’s never really recovered.

Doris M. You’ve written in other places about being sent off to boarding school.

Virginia M. Yes. Yes. Ironically, my mother told me later she sent me because she was afraid my father would incest me.

Doris M. About when did she say that?

Virginia M. Some years after I was out of high school. So see, so that's how totally blind she was to herself. That she had been trying her best. And it was only because I had had a lover at age eleven that I knew what was right and what was—I mean, you know, what was love-making and what was appropriate to mothers and daughters. And so I knew to say no. But that's another whole subject. That's the subject of statutory rape. Technically Madeline committed statutory rape. She was 21; I was 11.

Doris M. Who was Madeleine?

Virginia M. She was a church. . . member of our church, and the older sister of a girl of my age. So I went to see the girl my age, and wound up in bed with Madeline. And her parents colluded with us. Apparently I was not the first young person that she had slept with their—I mean, her mother came in one time when things were thick and fast between us to close the windows. And she *had* to have known. I mean, no one could walk into a room that charged with sex and not know—and never said a word. So this went on for a while. And then my mother went through my stuff. I never had a private anything. I mean, I hid a love letter from Madeline in my handbag and hid the handbag. But my mother found the handbag and went through it. She never felt I had a boundary to call my own; I was hers. So she felt no guilt for that. And then the whole family had a big discussion about what to do with “it.” And they actually referred to me as “it,” you know. (laughs) I was in the corner and I was, *wool! Scared!* So they decided they would go and confront the other family.

Doris M. Did you have a sense, when you and Madeline were in bed together, that what you were doing was wrong? Had that already, like, formed?

Virginia M. Well, I didn't know there was anything about the age difference. I didn't give a damn about that. She was beautiful and I wanted her and she wanted me. My God, I could hardly believe it. That was the first person that ever listened to me—of course I was going to respond! She treated me like I knew something and like I was something. And no one had ever treated me that way before. So I didn't care whether it was wrong or not; I felt wonderful. And this was another of [the feelings], you know, that went on for years. The feeling of oh, God, you know, it's so wrong what I'm doing, why does it feel so good? (laughs) And I couldn't say no to it. What child could say no to the first person that ever was loving to them? So anyway, my mother, that was the real reason she sent me away. And I was just shocked when she said that thing about Dad might have incested me. Because he never, never was any such thing. I mean, my Dad went for adult women. And granted, he loved adult women plenty. And they loved him plenty. But he was certainly not a child molester.

Doris M. And he had already moved out, hadn't he?

Virginia M. Yes, yes, yes. But she knew I was sneaking to see him. I began in high school to understand that, you know, there was not a life for him with her. And that he had probably done what was best for him and so I sneaked to see him. And boy, when she figured that out, she took a horse whip and hit me across the chest. And I had been taught that if you got hit there, you got cancer. That was the old wives' tale that went around at that time. I remember lying there just crying my eyes out, sure I was going to get cancer, and from my mother.

Doris M. I know that you said that you were very devout, and strongly part of a church community. Was there any sense of recourse to anybody in the church?

Virginia M. No, [nobody talked about sex]. No, it was a Plymouth Brethren Assembly. And my uncle was one of the chief elders. He would have supported the family in any way. All of the others were—I mean, one of the elders sold my mother the double bed. Nobody said, “Why do you want a double bed to sleep with your daughter? She’s in puberty. She needs a little privacy, for heaven’s sake. Give her at least her own twin bed to sleep in.” No, nobody, nobody—I swear, it was a generation that was innocent of psychology. I don’t think they understood the repercussions at all. Or maybe I’m excusing them. They weren’t educated. It was a storefront church, you know, it was not an educated bunch. They believed the world was 4,000 years old. They found no problems with that. (laughs) So, science didn’t really impinge a whole lot on their lives. So it was very funny when I was working on my master’s degree. Working with a great Ph.D. named Elizabeth Schneider, who really was, she was a magnificent scholar. And to go from that, and then to listen to these discussions of the Bible that were so ignorant, was really quite an experience. (laughs)

Doris M. But they must have cared enough about education to want you to get an education, to send you to a boarding school. How did that come about?

Virginia M. Well, [yes, she] sent me to the boarding school. See, the boarding school was a Southern Presbyterian high school. And Southern Presbyterians were very, very fundamentalist. That was before the church united. It took the Presbyterian Church back a ways, let me tell you, when they did unite. Because the Southern—always, same thing happened to the Methodists—when the Southern church comes in, the church moves toward the right. Anyway, it was the Southern Presbyterian school that my aunt and uncle knew well, and gave a lot of money to. And it was for missionaries’ kids, basically. But sometimes kids of Christians here in this country could come. Whereas the missionary kids had to work like slaves for part of their payment, I supposedly was full paid, so I didn’t have to

work. Well, they trumped up a charge after I'd been there for about six weeks. First thing, before I ever got there, they told everybody I was a lesbian, and to be careful because I might jump them. So I noticed all the girls never were alone with me. If I went into a room where there was only one other girl, she left. And I couldn't understand this, because I tend to make friends very easily. And it just didn't, wasn't happening. So then I found, finally one of them said to me, "You know, you're not like what they said." I said, "Huh? What did they say?" "They said that you were a lesbian and you might jump us." I said, "Oh, God. So I'm a rapist?" "Yeah, yeah, I guess that's what it would mean." So I was kind of horrified, you know? Such a thing I never dreamed of. But they [school administrators] trumped up a charge that I had forcibly stripped a girl. And the real charge was based on my running after her with a wet washcloth and stuffing it down the back of her shirt. That's as much as happened. But that's all they needed. So from then on, I had to work as if we were not paid in full. They got a lot of extra work out of me. It was either that or be sent home. And the last thing I wanted to do was face my mother. So, I stayed there.

Doris M. But didn't you feel betrayed by your family that they had propagated this lie about you?

Virginia M. No, what else was new? No, I did not feel betrayed! That's how my life had been. I had nobody on my side. I'm telling you, there was nobody on my side.

Doris M. That's a sad way to grow up.

Virginia M. At one point I wrote to my mother and said, "I want you to know that I am corresponding with my dad. I need to be in touch with my dad." And she wrote back and said, "Disobedience to parents is equivalent to witchcraft." That's a passage out of the Old Testament. Meaning I should be killed for corresponding

with my father. Subsequently, of course, after I was married and ready to get out of the marriage and dealing with a psychologist in Ringwood, he said, “You know, that was just so healthy that you wanted to see your father. That was so healthy. You refused to turn against the male half of the human race.” I said, “I certainly did.” I said, “Simply from a theological standpoint, I would find that [rejecting men] wrong. If we were created with that particular diversity, then you accept that diversity.” And of course now my message is you [should] accept the *whole* diversity God has created, including all the transgender animals and people and all the transsexuals and all the intersexuals and all the people that the church seems to think it knows better than God, and God shouldn’t have made those mistakes. But I began very, very early. No! I was not going to reject the male half of the human race. So it’s always been a great irony to me when people have assumed that because I was lesbian I didn’t like men. I don’t want to *sleep with* men. That’s not the same thing as I don’t like men. I like men very much. In fact sometimes I enjoy conversation with men even more than conversation with women, because they’re trained the way my mind was trained. I was trained in a patriarchal environment. And I am linear, rather than circular. And I get along very, very well with men; I just don’t want to sleep with most of them. I’ve got a *tiny* bisexual component. Very small. Somebody just right, maybe I could manage, you know. (laughs) Somebody just effeminate enough and tender enough, someone that I might be able to couple up with. But it would be a surprise.

Doris M. Could you talk, honestly, with your dad, though, about your feelings or about your experiences. Or was the persona of the tough kind of upper lip kind of block you from—

Virginia M. No. When I met him, you know, [would] sneak to meet him downtown or something—because I was using public transportation to get to high school, so

she couldn't control entirely where I went—I used it to meet him. I told him that I was lesbian. He said, “You'll get over it.” So that was the length of that conversation. See, that's what I mean, my dad was never there for me, either.

Doris M. But he certainly wasn't condemning.

Virginia M. He wasn't abusive of me. Yeah, and he wasn't condemning. Of course at that time he was living in, what he would call, living in sin. Now what he meant by wronging me, when he said he knew he had wronged me, from the other side of the grave at Lily Dale through that psychic I had told you about, what he meant was that when he got right with God—that is, when he went back to the Presbyterian Church and told my brother that he now was sorry for all his sins and sorry he had left my mother—[that] didn't mean he paid her anything. Didn't mean he paid back any of the money. Didn't mean he wrote to her or corrected [things] in any way. I mean, I thought he should have done amends as much as he could, you know. And my brother never required that of him. He just required him to say he was right with God. But my brother *did* tell him that he should drop me [for being lesbian]. And he did. After all those years of my being the only one who cared about him, he dropped me for about a year. And after about a year, I called his wife, Nina, and I said, “I don't think this is fair.” And she said, “I don't, either. Let me talk to him.” And so she brought him around, and then we began to correspond again. And the funny thing, his pastor—he got a pastor at the church who was just out of Princeton—this pastor brought in my book, The Divine Feminine, and said he wanted to do a series on it. My father sat through that entire series and never admitted I was his daughter until the end, when he was sure the pastor wasn't going to run me down. And then he admitted I was his daughter. So that's typical of my family; absolutely not there if I'm going to take the buckshot—only there if I'm going to get praised. (laughs)

Doris M. It seems that, in distinction, that you're the one in the family who took a lot of the buckshot.

Virginia M. Yeah, I did. I did. What family there is left, other than my son and his wife, they don't understand me. My cousins, one will have nothing to do with me. The other will; is very sweet in many ways. But ix-nay on the feminism, and ix-nay on the lesbianism. So there's only so much you can say. And then my brother, I don't know my own nephew and niece, and I don't know their children.

Doris M. So this birth canal that you describe, kind of the darkness of your childhood opening up into a more freeing and open sense of spirituality hasn't necessarily cut you off from the past. But it had to be transcended, if I understand what you're saying.

Virginia M. Yeah, see, and family means a lot to me. I think family means a great deal to a great many lesbian and gay people. And I tell people when they say, "Oh, my child is—they are crying, some of them sneak to see me because they don't want to be guilty by association, come to the airport, even, to tell me—"my daughter is a lesbian." "My son is a gay man." And my first words are, "Oh, how lucky you are!" You ought to see how thunderstruck [they look]. And then I say, "You know, because gay people, if you just will accept that child, this child is yours forever." I mean, I'm the one who tries to keep the keepsakes in the family; the rest don't care. There's a tremendous feeling of family. And I think it's true of gay and lesbian people. Even though my family didn't accept me, I accepted them. And would have loved to love them, and do love them. They can't stop me from loving them, even if they think I'm evil.

Doris M. What kept that alive all those years?

Virginia M. (Pause) Well, it depends on what kind of language you want to use. You want to use Christian language, the Christ in me was too strong to let go of any little bit that had ever been loving. If you want to use more New Age language, I think I'm an old soul. I think I came in here, chose this family. It was very helpful to me when I met that concept, that you're, you're—it's not that *my* personality, Virginia, chose to go through all of this, but that my deep self, my eternal self, knew that I would have a ministry if I just went through it all, then I would be able to turn around and help the people who are coming through it. And maybe not quite as able to handle it as I was. And that's exactly what's happened. I mean, when I meet somebody who's been a survivor of incest, I know what to say. And I know what not to say. And they trust me, because I was there. And so when I meet somebody who's been persecuted for being gay, they trust me because I was there. At this point, I'm very happy. As a matter of fact, about Debra, I feel the same way. I chose this. I told her, "Stop the guilt already!" I think she feels so guilty she still hasn't been able to find anybody. It's ten years now since she left me.

Doris M. And this is Debra, your second lover.

Virginia M. My lover that lived here with me for sixteen years. Here in Hewitt. And I said, "You know, we made an agreement. As far as I'm concerned, we made an agreement on the other side before we came into this life that we would meet, we would recognize each other from eternity." And she knew me before I knew her. She saw me move, and said, "Oh, that's why I came to Kirkridge." [Kirkridge Conference and Retreat Center] Just saw me walking, a distance from her. And then came on (slapping sound) like a ton of bricks. Well, she started it but I finished it. And I think that, I said, "I think we agreed to that. We would find each other at that juncture in our lives when we needed one another. And we would stay together for 16 years. And you would leave, because I never could have left

you. I *never* could have left you. And I *needed* you to leave.” So I think it did help her with the guilt. She doesn’t say anything, but I think it did help her feel less guilty.

Doris M. I’m thinking back to the high school, the young woman graduating from high school who maybe didn’t have the advantage of that much understanding. Could you maybe just help us see through your eyes why you decided to go to Bob Jones University and what you imagined your life could have consisted of in those days?

Virginia M. Well, there are many reasons why I went to Bob Jones. One of which was we couldn’t have afforded anything else. I mean, my mother said that if there was enough money for only one, my brother would of course go to college and I would not.

Doris M. Can you explain?

Virginia M. Well, because he was male. And males are the movers and shakers of the world. And females are to get married and have children.

Doris M. But how could you afford to go to Bob Jones?

Virginia M. Well, Bob Jones was only about \$500 a year at the time. And other colleges were thousands a year at the time. Now, of course, it’s [the cost of college] out of this world. And my mother said she would help me to the degree she could. And as a matter of fact, she did. I mean, I did take some work. I graded papers and stuff once I established myself at Bob Jones. I graded papers for professors. But the other thing was that at Hampton Dubose Academy, this high school I’ve been talking about, they told me I could never survive Bob Jones discipline. And of

course, you know, again, it's a male thing, but I have a hard time (laughs) not taking a dare. (laughs) "The hell with you, I can so!" And it was either that or Wheaton [College], and Wheaton was much more expensive. And so I went to Bob Jones. And they, thank God, did not tell. That's the one kindness Hampden Dubose Academy ever did to me. They did not tell Bob Jones about my lesbianism. So of course, I survived fine. Because I at least had a level playing field to work with.

Doris M. Can you remember anything about the classes or the experience that felt particularly right or strong or something you wanted to pursue at the time?

Virginia M. Oh, literature. The minute—in high school, even—I knew I would teach literature. I always loved it. In fact there were classes that they wouldn't let me take in high school because I knew more than the teacher. The teacher would say, "You know more than I do. You can't take this class." Well I've never understood that exactly, I mean, even then, when teachers would say that. I had a Milton professor: the first class I ever read Milton, never had seen Paradise Lost or any of the other works in my life. This teacher took me aside and said, "Please don't ask questions in class, because I don't know the answers to the kind of questions you ask." Well now, see, my philosophy of teaching is that once you learn three little words you never have to be afraid of a question: "I don't know." And I relaxed the minute I learned to say "I don't know" to students. And I love to hear questions I didn't know the answer to! Love it! So I've never understood this, I can only. . . they must have been frightened individuals, too frightened, low self-esteem or something. I turned on to literature the minute I read anything good.

Doris M. But you didn't have a sense of wanting to go to a state university or some other cheap way to go to college.

Virginia M. Didn't know about it. I really didn't know about it. In a sense, it was a very sheltered life. I didn't know. I remember when I began to read black literature. I mean, I was just stunned by what I read in those books! Where was I? I would have been in junior high, beginning high school. And immediately, I read The Invisible Man, couldn't believe the awful things that black kids were put through. And of course felt a pretty strong identification with some of it. So that I wasn't angry at the race riot. I understood that race riot from the beginning. I understood what they did to me. I understood they did it because they thought I was—had white privilege and they didn't. And I guess I did.

Doris M. Would you consider yourself quite a reader as an adolescent?

Virginia M. Yes. Oh, once I found out good stuff. See, when I was a kid, they gave me things like *Elsie Dinsmore*. Did you ever hear of those books? They're sadistic books. Sadistic! You go back and read, you'll be shocked. Elsie Dinsmore did whatever her dear papa wanted. They were Victorian sadism. It was just—ugh. So that was what I had to read, and I read it, because I read anything I could read, anything I could get my hands on. But I read like *The Lives of the Martyrs*, things like that. (laughs) The stuff that was around, you know, at my grandmother's house. I never heard really good music; it was all Christian music. And Christian music then wasn't what Christian music is now. Which is worse and better, in a way. But at least it has some interest to it. Then it was, you know, "The Old Rugged Cross" and things like that. So when I began to hear good music, instantly, instantly I went crazy for it. But I was in high school by the time I heard good music. So it was just a matter of not knowing. I did not know the options. I mean, hell, if I had known the options, I'd have gone for theology. But I didn't. You know, women just didn't do theology. The one thing I heard about women in theology was at Hampden Dubose Academy, where I heard that any time a woman did theology, the result was always heresy. And I was very embarrassed. The one proof they

gave of that was, oh, the woman named Jezebel. So she was a theologian and she got thrown to the dogs and they ate her alive. I remember feeling so ashamed to be a female, if that's what it was. We were so bad. Our minds were so poor. I remember being told at Bob Jones that women's minds were inferior to men's, because men took things apart and understood the sections of them. And women always trying to make a unification out of things. So this was the reason why men were just so superior to women. I remember the shame just washing over me. (laughs) Instead of getting mad, you see. Because that was the passive training. I was trained to be very, very passive.

Doris M. But at the same time, it seems like you took on, you know, some of the values of that sort of male system of, you know, being strong.

Virginia M. Absolutely. I was going to be—you know how the prisoner takes on the jailer's characteristics. The refugee tries to take on the characteristics of the new culture. So yeah, I did. It was just such a patriarchal thing, and yet matriarchal, see. So it was so mixed up. Everything's so mixed up in my childhood and youth. And I think I sorted it out as fast as anybody could have sorted it out.

Doris M. What did you make of your sexuality when you were in college?

Virginia M. (Pause) Well, I was told that if I just behaved heterosexually, heterosexual feelings would follow.

Doris M. That's a pretty intimate conversation. Who did you have it with?

Virginia M. Yeah, it was with a lesbian teacher who never admitted she was lesbian. (laughs) And she told me that. Isn't that awful? See, that's what I mean. I met one person after another who told me one thing and did the other. At Hampden Dubose

Academy, Mrs. Dubose used to call me in and tell me, “No, you cannot be [lesbian], it’s wrong. You cannot do this. God does not approve of your loving women.” And then when she would reduce me to tears, then she would gather me to her bosom. Well, years later I found out that she had a long sexual relationship with the dean of women [at a christian college]. So, what a hypocrite. And I was her jollies, you know, for the moment. So, there was. . . I used to wonder why, when I would get called to Mrs. DuBose’s apartment, I would be afraid, yet also, (makes hot hissing sound) cause I knew there was going to be that little something after I got bawled out. So. The mixture of pain and pleasure was really extreme in my early life. And I was so sure that if I just lived as well as I could, kept my hands off girls, which I did for a long time, they would eventually say, you know, “You’re a good Christian.” And instead, the daughter who was actually running the school at the time, she would take me, the Dubose daughter, she would take me aside every once in a while and tell me that I was still evil. That I had to know there’s no cure for this. They were right about that part, no cure for the lesbianism. “But God has no room for people like you.” So finally I got the message. What were they telling me? They’re telling me to get the hell out of this life. So I tried. With the only means I had. I was going to try to fling myself into the water and swim out until I couldn’t get back.

Doris M. That’s so lonely and painful when you’re that age.

Virginia M. Yes. Especially when I wasn’t allowed to date, but I wasn’t allowed to be alone with anybody. So I couldn’t build intimacy with anybody. Neither male nor female was I allowed. It was hypocritical for a lesbian to go out with boys. And then on the other hand, girls, that was evil. But I had a lot of friends anyway. (laughs) They were very good to me. But this one girl, it was at gym class where she did this, the, the time, it was just the coup de grace, the straw that sort of broke the camel’s back---

Doris M. This is at Hampden—

Virginia M. At Hampden Dubose Academy, yeah. And I, I guess must have had a thunder cloud all over my face. And I finally left gym class with the intention of going down to the lake and destroying myself. And there was a girl there who saw me and followed me down into the woods. And she said, “You know, I’m just like you, only they don’t know it.” Well I thought she meant she was sexually active and they didn’t know it. She called me years [later] to tell me, “I told you I was a lesbian like you.” And I just couldn’t believe it because she was, you know, she was femme. And I just didn’t know that there were lesbians who were that femme. Of course, I should have known. Madeline was femme. (My first lover, when I was eleven.) But anyway, you know—

(End Tape One, Side A. Begin Side B.)

Doris M. Virginia, you were just talking about a suicide attempt when you were thirteen.

Virginia M. Thirteen. Yeah, so this lovely girl who has, did not suffer the same kind of persecution I did, told me that she cared about me and so on, and please not to do a thing like this. And brought me back, but she then told the Duboses what she had just done. And they put me into the, what do they call it? The sick bay, essentially, and made me read a book about the devil. Which is wonderful reading for somebody who was already depressed, you know. *Whom Resist* was the name of the book. And I can remember hanging over the toilet, trying to throw up. And it was then that I realized that in all my life, I had never been able to throw up. I was so sick, but I couldn’t throw up. It’s only been in recent years that I’ve been able to throw up. I mean everything, I was so trained that everything had to be held in, held in, held in. So I was [sick]; the thing that brought me through that

was that she not only told the Duboses about it, which I think she felt she had to because she was too afraid I might succeed in some other attempt, but that she told the students. And they would, they threw—there was a transom on this place where I was being kept captive—and they wrote little notes to me and wrapped them around candies and threw them over the transom. And that’s what brought me back. Because so many more people were willing to say they loved me once they realized.

Doris M. That’s pretty touching.

Virginia M. One of the great experiences for me, cause I used to crawl off into the [attic]—my aunt who knew the Duboses and who caused me to be sent to that place, she was my favorite, too, Aunt Edna. She read me Romans 1. This had occurred before my suicide attempt. And she told me that all that applied to me. You know, without God in their minds.

Doris M. I don’t what Romans 1—

Virginia M. Well, Romans 1 is a passage about women expressing their lust with other women. Men with men, and women with women. It’s the only place where lesbianism is ever expressed, if, indeed, it is. There are scholars who argue that it has to do with women prostituting themselves anally. “Leaving the natural use of the woman,” is what it says. It could just as well be. You know, leaving vaginal intercourse and moving to anal intercourse as a part of their prostitution. But anyway, I didn’t know anything about all of that. She [Aunt Edna] just told me the whole thing was a description of lesbians. I remember crawling off into the eaves of that school. It was the only place that I could be alone. And praying, “Oh, God, how can I be without You in my mind? I’ve memorized scripture, I’ve

memorized whole books of the Bible. I think about you all the time. How can I be without You in my mind?"

Doris M. Without God.

Virginia M. Yes, without God in my mind. And yet, that's what my aunt told me I was. So that all led up to the suicide attempt. But then my aunt told me some years later that when a woman had come from Dohnavur, do you know what Dohnavur is? It was a, there was a famous Christian writer [Amy Carmichael] who founded a place for children who had been thrown out of their homes and so on. Lepers and so on. And it was called Dohnavur. And they thought that Hampden Dubose Academy was modeled after Dohnavur. Well, a woman came from Dohnavur and visited. And she told my aunt later, she never saw anything that was *less* like Dohnavur. Because there was so much class, such a class distinction, tremendous class distinctions. (laughs) It's everything that they attempted to do away with at Dohnavur. But for some reason, the Duboses allowed me to sit at the guest table, you know, class one, while she was there. And she said [to my aunt], "You know, I only met one real Christian at Hampden Dubose Academy, and her name was Virginia Ramey." Well, I nearly fainted when I heard that description of myself, you know. Because God knows nobody ever said anything like that to me. And I loved Dohnavur. I read a lot of the books and I loved all that they stood for. So I was very. . . that was one of the first really encouraging things that ever came into my life, other than the statutory rape. (I'm not going to defend statutory rapists, but on the other hand, I know that there are times when it is positive for the so-called victim. And it was for me.)

Doris M. So you had an inner experience, or I'll say inner experience, of whatever that feeling of goodness and love was when you thought about God. The God experience was healing and strong for you.

Virginia M. The Jesus experience, yeah. Because God was Jesus. I mean, Jesus and God, there was almost no distinction at all. There wasn't any distinction at all in the way I was brought up. So [in] Jesus I always felt that there was a friend there. And yet, I would get terribly scared to hear that he was not really my friend 'cause I was lesbian, see.

Doris M. And that's how you interpreted Romans.

Virginia M. Well, that's how she interpreted it to me. And I didn't know any better. I've had people come to me and say, "Virginia, just let me hear in your voice how to read Romans. It's just killing me." So I know I'm not the only one who's gone through that.

Doris M. So when you went to Bob Jones, it was a lot more. . . your studies were more secular in that they were about literature.

Virginia M. Well, you had to take a Bible class, and it was pretty superficial. "If it's not in the syllabus, it's not important," the professor said at one point. (laughs) And I thought, "Oh my God!" It was his way of saying, "Don't ask me questions I don't know the answer to. Cause if I put it in the syllabus, I know the answer." (laughs) But I did have this lesbian teacher that I took to, of course. Of course she was willing to at least raise interesting and enigmatic questions about why people did what they did and everything. It was as close to theology, real theology, as I could get. And as close to real psychology as I could get. [I] toyed with studying psychology, but discovered that it was going to be mostly about nerve endings and synapses. And oh, crap, I don't want to do that. Literature is where they're talking about what I want to talk about. And she was a pretty good teacher. She

certainly gave me lousy advice about getting married. But she was, after all, very closeted herself at the time. And very afraid. So.

Doris M. Did you want to talk at all about making a decision to get married?

Virginia M. Yeah, well that decision was really hard. It sounds so cold-blooded if I say it now. But it wasn't entirely conscious. I was told that if I did, I would discover heterosexual leanings in me. I had a speech teacher at Hampden Dubose Academy who was lesbian who got married. And she claimed that she could, you know, it could be done. And I kind of believed her, even though she also dallied with me. Plenty. But I kind of believed her that if I was sincere enough and I threw myself into it enough, I would come out with heterosexual feelings. But a part of me didn't believe that. I mean, nobody believes in behaviorism except—that's behavioristic advice to tell you that you just do it and after a while you feel it. That's a load of crap. I don't believe in behaviorism anywhere else. And they didn't either! It was only to the homosexuals that they would say a thing like that. You notice, they still use behavioristic stuff on us. And they don't believe it in any other area of life! They don't believe that "Just do it and then you'll begin to feel it." Nonsense. But anyway, I hoped it was true. Let's put it that way. I also knew that there was no way out of living with my mother except [marriage]—she still felt that I had no boundaries. The boundary between me and her was completely permeable from her side. Not from my side. She had her privacy; I had none—so I didn't want that. Even though I could keep her at bay sexually, I still didn't want that. I couldn't ever even walk near her, because she'd have her hand on my breast or my backside. I mean, I had to be constantly defensive. So I knew I didn't want to live with her. And the one way in our family—I mean I knew, my Sunday school teacher lived with her mother all her life. Who knows what went on? I'd like to know what goes on in some of those homes. I don't believe it's all innocent anymore. No. No idea what went on—but anyway, that

was the role model that I saw. And I thought, this is the way out. So I did it. I had taught one year at Bob Jones. Taught one year, that's where I really heard the stuff behind the scenes. "You are not entitled to an opinion about what I say," Bob Jones said to the assembled faculty. He said things like that to the students, too, but I was especially horrified [that] he said it to the faculty. (laughs)

Doris M. Did you do that after you graduated?

Virginia M. I did it after I graduated, yeah. I had gone to summer school at Temple [University]. I had met Elizabeth Schneider. And it's amazing. It was amazing. At first she said to me, "Well you don't come from a really—from a school that meets all our requirements." Bob Jones. So she said, "You may have to take some extra courses." After about six weeks in her classes she called me and she said, "Forget it. No problem." And she was just wonderful to me. Wonderful to me. But at the same time, caused me to doubt my faith because I knew a great scholar when I met one, and she was the first great scholar I'd ever met. And she was an atheist. So I, boy, I really questioned everything from then on.

Doris M. That's a strong, that must have been a tremendous—

Virginia M. It was tremendous. She said it one day in class. She was never, never trying to convince anybody of anything. But she said one day in class, just an off comment, "It's a weakness in man to seek an absolute." I had to walk home from school after that. I walked blocks, you know, through that tenderloin district of Philadelphia. Is this [my faith] weakness in me? Is it weakness in me that I believe in God? She was shocked, later, when I told her what I went through over that statement. She was shocked that she would have said it. Shocked at the impact it had on me. But it was good for me.

Doris M. And where did you find something solid when you struggled with that?

Virginia M. (Pause) In my experience. I mean, basically it was my experience. And I still wasn't feminist enough to hold my head up when I said "That's my experience." But now I can, of course, hold my head up when I say it. But it was because I had *experienced* something. And again, I'm an old soul. I knew something when I came here. And I didn't totally forget it. So I developed a metaphor that you don't grow by cutting yourself off at the ankles. There may be something wrong with your feet, but it's not going to help you to cut yourself off at the ankles. And you don't—flowers don't grow if you help them out by pulling on them. I mean, it's not how it works. So I always felt that I needed to make some kind of an adjustment to what I started out as. I needed to relate to that; to transform it, but to relate to it, and not to jettison it. And you know, I had experiences like those dopes at William Patterson University that wanted to throw Milton out of the curriculum. No, no, no, no, no! I mean, if he's wrong about some things, you talk about that. And that's important to the classroom. But you don't throw the whole thing out. And of course they wanted the Bible out. And no, no, no, no, no! The seeds of our liberation are also there. Yes, there are horrible passages! Yes, there are texts of terror. But they are also the seeds of our liberation. You do not throw this away. You work with it. You work with it until you understand it differently.

Doris M. I also hear that there's something about the experience of literature that was drawing you forward in a way that brought that potential for conflict that close to you.

Virginia M. Yes.

Doris M. And so at this time, when you're on the faculty at Bob Jones, are you thinking of graduate school? Because that wasn't typical for women in the Fifties. Especially—

Virginia M. No, it wasn't. I've only realized recently how atypical it was.

Doris M. Could you say more about that?

Virginia M. Well, Lillian Faderman talks about it in her book, In Praise of Women. There was a real campaign starting in the Thirties to get women out of—I mean, there were many women who were principals and university professors and gradually they were weeded out and replaced by male professors even in the women's colleges. And it was done by saying that too much education creates a lesbian, creates a masculine woman. One of the major ways. So that by the time I went for a Ph.D., [women were] a very small percentage. There had been a much higher percentage of women going for Ph.D.s . . . when I was [a child].

Doris M. Can you remember anything about the numbers of fellow students who were women and who were men? (Pause) Did you feel like you were in a man's world?

Virginia M. Yeah, more or less. Yes. I of course always took woman professors wherever I could. But there weren't, there was [only] one at NYU. (laughs) Let me just come back to this thing about literature and what that did for me. One day I was reading a feminist book. And this is really a turnaround point for me. I was reading a feminist book, and it said there were two versions of Genesis--two versions of the creation in Genesis. And I made a dive for my Bible because I was sure she was wrong. And by God, it was true. And I looked at this and I thought my God, these are two different plots. Tone is different. Plot's different. Characters are

somewhat different. How could I have read so horribly? I have a Ph.D. in literature and I'm reading this and I'm not seeing what I'm looking at. And I thought my God, it's the fundamentalist grid. I'm reading through a fundamentalist grid when I read the Bible. I had been taught there were no contradictions. Initially this looks like nothing other than a contradiction. But it can't be there. So I can't see it. And I made a vow to myself that day, "I will start to read on all my cylinders, so help me God. I'm not going to read Milton more carefully than I read the Bible. And I'm not going to read Chaucer more carefully than I read the Bible."

Doris M. And this is when you were at Temple or. . . ?

Virginia M. This is, where was I? I'm trying to remember this. Well, I was married. I was out of Temple already. I already had a Ph.D. So after 1964 sometime, cause I got my Ph.D. then. Living in Ringwood with my husband.

Doris M. And can you say again when someone pointed out to you those two interpretations in the Bible?

Virginia M. It was, I was reading a feminist book. I forget which one. But it [feminism] started for me where it started for so many other people, with The Feminine Mystique. I thought this is me, there it is. You know, supposed to make cookies for the bake sale and not have anything to say about any major issues. Isn't it something what they're saying about Teresa Heinz Kerry, too? She should have been a little more woozy over her husband instead of taking off on the issues? Which is what she did in that great speech! Oh, my goodness. So anyway, I read The Feminine Mystique and I thought, "Well, this is the truth."

Doris M. But in some ways, people might think that that wouldn't have fit you because you had gone on with your career. You had married, had a child, and then gone back for a masters and Ph.D. with a young child. That must have been a very, well, first of all, it just seems very demanding.

Virginia M. Yeah. I saw that I needed it. I was teaching on a master's degree. Only in fundamentalist colleges could that happen, of course. But I was teaching on a master's degree at college. And there were just a lot of things I didn't know. And I wanted to know them. So I went back for a Ph.D.

Doris M. I see.

Virginia M. And yes, it was very hard. I mean, especially since my husband did very little around the house. He cared very little about his son or about me. And was more or less a deadweight. So it was hard. Fortunately we were living on a campus and a lot of the kids were very lonely for their little brothers and sisters and very happy to babysit. So I could easily get people. I was adored on that campus. I mean, I was a very young professor. Just adored. So anything I wanted. Anything I wanted, I got. (laughs)

Doris M. Could you say a little more about that?

Virginia M. If I wore a trench coat, everybody got trench coats. It was just, whatever I did. (laughs) I wrote with black ink, pretty soon black ink, everybody wrote with black ink.

Doris M. Well that's quite a turnaround from someone who felt like an outcast in high school.

Virginia M. Yeah, well, I was an outcast in high school. That's why I felt like one. (laughs) But I always knew I could make friends easily, and I did. I mean, during the summer, the kids who were stuck down there at Hampden Dubose, you know, I'd send them packages, care packages. And they'd write me these loving letters. So you know, from the get go, I always knew I could find lovers if I wanted them and I could find friends if I wanted them. I always knew that. It was just never an issue. Again, I think it probably has something to do with the old soul thing, you know. It just was never a question. And I always had enough money, even when I eagerly looked for a quarter in my letter from my mother, you know? I always managed financially. I never worried about it particularly.

Doris M. So then feeling accepted and having a child and being good at your career didn't stop how you felt when you read Feminine Mystique. That still fit.

Virginia M. No. Oh, no. No. It still did fit. Because you know, here I was the one woman professor in a fundamentalist college. And they would come and ask me to bake cookies. They wouldn't have asked any of the male professors to bake cookies! For heaven's sake! You know, so I began to get some sense of "This is ridiculous! I'm doing the same job their husband's doing." But because I'm in a skirt, which I was, I should have to make the cookies.

Doris M. And grade the papers.

Virginia M. And grade the papers. And when the men would have lunch on the table for them, I went home to do my kid's wash, you know? Wash dirty diapers. And if I had any lunch at all, I made it myself. And when I made dinner, he sat down and ate it and watched TV while I cleaned up the dishes. And then I had to study after that, and I had to study (in a disgusted tone) with the TV constantly in my ears. I mean, I've really learned how to focus. So this stuff about these multimedia things that

they have, I can't do it. I can only, one focus. One focus only. Because I had to keep that (slapping sound) damn TV out of my ears. Or the nastiness that he said to me, also, out of my ears. (laughs)

Doris M. It sounds like there wasn't much support in the house there.

Virginia M. No. But see, the kids loved me so much. The students loved me. The minute I hit the classroom, I mean, I had a love affair the whole time I taught. I taught for forty-some years. Forty-*four* years. It was a love affair from the beginning. I mean, wham! So when I was between lovers, when I didn't have anybody in my personal life, I always had the class. They loved me, and I loved them. And it was buoyant. It was a buoyant feeling. And it kept. . . they [the administrators] became very suspicious of me at Shelton [College].

Doris M. That's where you were teaching.

Virginia M. Yeah. That's how I got in this area. Shelton was right down in Ringwood. And they got very suspicious of my closeness to some students. But then they were afraid, because the students loved me so much as a whole, that they were afraid to touch me.

Doris M. Can you say a little bit more about that? I guess I'm curious if you felt a lot of sexual energy with particular students.

Virginia M. Oh, sure, sure. Yeah, I'm ashamed to say that I had a relationship with one. I mean, I'm ashamed because I was married, and because I was a teacher. I didn't really understand that dynamic. That wasn't being taught yet. It was really feminists who finally brought that [the student-teacher power differential] to the fore. But I did have a relationship with a student. And I think it was a good thing

for her. We were in touch with each other for many, many years thereafter. But I went to announce that I was [pregnant], I saw the shock on the dean's face, because I know they had been ready to come after me. And then lo and behold, it turns out I'm pregnant. Well, I was doing my duty by my husband. And it meant nothing to me. I mean, sex with him was like. . . I felt like I was a fly on the wall watching it. That's a horrible feeling. Have you ever had that feeling?

Doris M. Yeah.

Virginia M. If you're just not in it at all, it's just not authentic. Whereas my relationships with women have always been authentic. I've always been there.

Doris M. And the persecution—

Virginia M. It just came so close. Let me tell you how close. Somebody visited Hampden Dubose Academy, somebody from the college visited.

Doris M. From Shelton?

Virginia M. From Shelton. And was told [about] my past. And came back and of course they started putting two and two together. So they called me in when the board was meeting. All men. Have you ever been in a room with all men and you're the only woman? I mean, all men who are a little older than you? There must have been 40 men in that room. And me. The only other time I experienced it was in the court when I was getting divorced. (sighs) What a feeling that is. So there they were. And what's his name, who was president of that splinter group? [He] was a totalitarian dictator. And I realize that, I needed both words because—(laughs)

Doris M. He was the president of Shelton?

Virginia M. Well, not exactly. But he really ran it. The presidents were kind of his stick figures. He said to me, and what I thank the lord for is that for some reason this man was attracted to me. There was an attraction. And I have to. . . I'm ashamed to admit, I felt a certain attraction toward him. All the worst things in me were attracted. My mother, see. So there was a certain attraction between us. So it made it harder for him to believe the story that he heard. But, he said to me, "You know, Virginia, we understand that you have a past." And I felt like I was nailed to the ground. All these eyes looking at me. Salaciously waiting for the details. And I didn't know what to say. So I said, "I guess we all do." And there was a long silence. And they said, "You can go now." And only years later did I learn that one of them there in that room had a long history of brushes with the law for taking up with minors. A homosexual history of taking up with minors. [That administrator] had bailed him out with the cops again and again and again. And they thought I knew. Cause I said, "I guess we all have a past."

Doris M. Oh my gosh.

Virginia M. And I had no idea what I was saying, you know? Have you ever heard of [the Bible verse], "Open thy mouth, and I will fill it?" I guess I opened my mouth and that's what came out. And it saved me. And only later did I find out that they had this background check on me and so on. And then I found out much more later, that there was trouble in the ranks right in that room. And they thought I knew. So they were afraid. They thought I would get them if they got me. Which I never would have, because that's not how my mind works.

Doris M. Oh my word. Wow.

Virginia M. (laughs) But that's how close I came.

Doris M. But you were married at this time.

Virginia M. Yes, I was married.

Doris M. But you were thinking of going to Nyack at that time.

Virginia M. Yes, well, things got so bad at Shelton that they did fire, they fired my sister-in-law just because she wasn't fundamentalist enough, I guess. Theology charges. And they fired a lot of good people. And so it was so bad at Shelton I thought, yuck! You know, so Nyack had asked me a couple of times to come there and teach part time and stuff. So I said, all right, I'll come there. So I taught there, and I was a great hit there, too. And they would have loved to [have] kept me. I was just finishing my Ph.D. And they were very sorry when I finished it and said I was leaving. But I could feel the divorce coming. And I knew that any fundamentalist college—although Nyack was by far the best fundamentalist college I had taught in--that's Christian Missionary Alliance. By far the best situation. I chaired the department there. But I knew that still, I mean, for instance, some of the greatest spiritual experiences I've ever had have occurred in the theater. And I was not free to say that. You weren't supposed to go to movies and theater. And for a literature teacher, that handcuff is pretty tight. So you come back after, I mean, I came back from *Amadeus*, oh, I could not believe it!

Doris M. The play *Amadeus*.

Virginia M. Yeah, the play on Broadway. I just could not believe what that did to me. And I couldn't even talk about it to my students! Let alone say, "Go to *Amadeus*. It's magnificent."

Doris M. So a pretty repressive administration. And you said that you could feel your divorce coming on, too.

Virginia M. Yeah, I knew that I couldn't [be divorced and stay in fundamentalist circles], see, and that's where Milton was so great for me. He wrote four divorce tracts. He wrote four tracts about divorce for incompatibility and argued that divorce for incompatibility was scriptural. Now he was talking the language I could trust. And I pored over those. And so it began to be possible for me to think, "I don't have to stick with this. Yes, I made this bed. But I don't have to lie in it for the rest of my life. I can get out of here." And that became stronger when my son's grades plunged. And he was drawing pictures of far away places I had taken him. I had taken him to Sorrento when I spoke there. And taken him to England, and had taken him to California on trips with various friends and lovers sometimes. He was drawing pictures of far away places. So I took him to a psychologist, same guy that helped me. And he said, "This boy knows that you are not happy. And he will not be happy until you're happy." So I was out of there. I was out of there. I was brought up, you stay with the marriage for the sake of the children. That's rotten advice. So he really empowered me to get out of there. I was out within weeks from the time I heard that. And indeed, Paul did do better once we moved here. And that's when I moved.

Doris M. So was there any aspect of feminism that was driving your move toward divorce? Did The Feminine Mystique or any of those other things increase the discomfort?

Virginia M. Oh, sure. Yeah, see, but I would have felt like I couldn't do anything about it if I had not had some scriptural help. Because I was so committed. A, because I love literature. And B, because I was brought up fundamentalist. And to me, the Bible was the word of God. And I could not flout it. So I needed that help. And that's why I said at Harvard, at the Women and Religion Conference, that what some of

the feminist scholars were writing would not have been helpful to me if I had seen it, because they were treating Ephesians 5 as if it really did say, “A woman must be submissive to her husband no matter what he did to her.” And that, it wouldn’t help me that they would then voice disapproval of this. I don’t care what they thought. If scripture—if they agreed with the most patriarchal interpretations of Ephesians 5—then I was stuck forever. I think eventually I would have said, “I don’t give a damn what the Bible says.” Because you get in enough pain, you’re going to do whatever you have to do to survive. But I wasn’t in that much pain yet. I couldn’t have done it for I don’t know how long. But those couple of things. To know that there was a biblical way to look at this, and not to be flouting scripture. To know that my son needed me to do it. To know that I was living inauthentically. I wanted to live more authentically. So I went for the divorce.

Doris M. The divorce before you really would consider yourself a feminist.

Virginia M. Oh, I considered myself a feminist already. But you know, it’s all gradual with me. I was becoming *more* feminist, you know.

Doris M. Your divorce began in, was it ’71? And was final in ’73?

Virginia M. Is that what, what are the dates in those two articles? (laughs) I have to look it up to see when I do things. Whatever it said, I think that’s accurate. It was a couple of years, at any rate, to get it over with. Even though it was for incompatibility, we didn’t charge each other with anything.

Doris M. But Paul was already—

Virginia M. He [Fred, my husband,] said he would charge me. He said he had proof that I was homosexual. And he did. He had taken pictures of me with a lover. So he did have

proof. And they were recognizable, too. He left them, he used to say to me, “Don’t blame me when your son hates you someday.” So when he was dead and my son cleaned out the house and went through the safe, and there were the pictures which he had kindly left for his son to find. What kind of a man is that, you know? So my son called me up and said, “Mother, I found some pictures.” I said, “I’ll be over. Be right over.” He didn’t have to tell me what the pictures were. I could tell by the tone of his voice. You know, his withered voice, you know. And he handed them to me in a sealed envelope and said, “I’m sorry my father was that kind of man.” That’s all he said. So Fred’s plan to make him hate me didn’t work. But I knew that that would be very hard for him, remembering my mother’s treatment of us. And I said, “Well, you know, he was married to me and he felt he owned me.” I said, “That’s what society taught men. And he felt that he owned my sexuality, and by the time this happened, things were long gone between him and me.” So that helped him. It did help him. Some time later he said, “I guess he thought he owned you.” And I said, “That’s right. That’s what was wrong.”

Doris M. And Paul was already 20 when the divorce was final.

Virginia M. Oh, no. No, no, no. He was maybe, he was about nine when we first walked out. And then he promptly got pneumonia. I knew he would. I got pneumonia, too, right after my mother and father broke up. And I also got rheumatic fever the year following. So I expected catastrophic illness and I got it. Sure enough, he got pneumonia. So that’s what I remember. He was nine or. . . And by the time it was finished, he was eleven. But we were living here then. He had the downstairs bedroom. Our guest room now, that you’ll be using. That was his room. And it wasn’t easy, you know. It wasn’t easy for him, of course. He felt guilt, inasmuch as he desired to leave, too, as the psychologist told me. So the guilt came from that, not from anything I said to him. (tape shuts off, resumes)

Doris M. Anything else you'd like to say about the divorce before we move on?

Virginia M. Just that it was another example of what I learned very young. And that is, that if somebody attempts to frighten you, you have to stand your ground or you'll be run after. You'll never have any peace. They [some boys] put a snake around my neck when I was a little girl, and I just stood there and acted like it didn't bother me at all. Then they thought I was very tough. But I was, of course, trembling and horrified the whole time. Well Fred said that he would prove in court that I was lesbian and that he would take Paul away from me. And I said, "Well, do what you have to do," and stood up to him. So I didn't know until we went into the court room whether he would or not. But I didn't think he would. And the reason is that he went to see my psychologist. And my psychologist was very smart. [Fred] offered to show him his pictures that he had. He flirted them in and out of his pocket. And the psychologist said, "I don't need to see anything that you have. Your wife has told me everything about herself. And I never heard her say one word that indicated she was an unfit mother, which is what you have to prove." And that wouldn't have stopped him. But then the psychologist said to him, "Have you thought about the amount of money it would cost you to replace your wife's services?" That is, if he had to buy babysitters and everything to take care of Paul and do all the housework that I did. And when I heard that, I said, "By golly, I think you just delivered me from him. Because money is something he never knows what he did with." He always made more than I did because he got [military] service counted on his records. So even though he finished college much later than I and only had an M.A. in the first place, which was in theology and didn't do him a bit of good in his teaching—still he got more money that I did from the get go. Because of having [military] service. He still never knew anything. He never knew where his money was. So I said [to my psychologist], "I think you've just delivered me from having to face this in court." And I think

that's why he didn't bring [lesbianism] up [in court]. 'Cause he realized he really wouldn't want to win because he wouldn't be able to pay for Paul, you see. He wanted me to have to carry that burden, and I did. I never asked him for a penny. Of course, I never got a penny from him when I was living with him. I supported Paul from the beginning, and myself. He never supported either one of us. He never knew where his money was. (short laugh)

Doris M. You know, when I hear the story, it's very clear that being aware of being lesbian and acting as a lesbian in the 1940s and the 1950s and the 1960s was very different than it is for people in the Seventies and Eighties and Nineties.

Virginia M. Tremendously.

Doris M. And I just want to thank you for making your story so poignant for people who wouldn't have known what that was like.

Virginia M. He told me, Fred told me, that if I were a normal woman, I would love to obey him. I think he actually had been convinced of that. Isn't that a convenient political position? (laughs) Anybody who doesn't obey you is abnormal. Well! Whoop de doo! And what he meant by normal was heterosexual, see, because I had told him that I had had experiences before we married. Which I never should have told him, but I did. And I was trying to be open and honest and all that—as honest as I could be. Oh well. He had his own reasons for being unable to really bear any kind of intimacy. So it's an interesting thing how we found each other. He found somebody who wouldn't want real intimacy with him, and I found somebody who wouldn't want real intimacy with me. We had a nice front. And I was very burdened by it. Because I hated the inauthenticity. At one point, my son had put together a slide show of our years as a family. And I really had to vomit afterwards. Because just watching, see, he didn't know how much he was hurting

me by showing me this. But just to remember how inauthentic it all was. What a fake.

Doris M. How long did that sense of not being out at your jobs and among different social groups or among different Christian groups, how long did that persist?

Virginia M. Oh, into the Eighties. Yeah. See, I didn't realize, we didn't even have gay history to study in the first place. And I was 30 before the word "homosexual" was first mentioned on the radio in the United States. I was 30. There was a show about homosexuals in America. And that was the first time.

Doris M. Can you tell me what show that was?

Virginia M. No, I can't. (laughs) But check, Duberman and gay history and stuff like that.

Doris M. But you didn't hear it. You're just saying—

Virginia M. No, I didn't hear the show. I looked at [the historical timeline] and I thought oh, well no wonder! When I was 30, I was benighted. I didn't know where the gay community was. I didn't know how to get to it. I mean, we all thought we were the only ones. We and our couple of friends, you know? And the first time I went into a gay bar in New York, I was terrified. Because I knew that I and my friends were all right, but I figured the others were what [people] said they were. The predators and all that [folks] said they were. And of course I sat and stared. Because it looked to me like they were just ordinary women trying to make out with each other. It didn't look like anything all that evil to me, you know?

Doris M. It's interesting how we'll have gay history, but we won't have a history of the predator[-phobia]. We won't have a history of how homosexuality was reviled and oppressed in cultures. That will disappear, it seems to me.

Virginia M. You think so? Well, we better hold onto it ourselves, then.

Doris M. Who would keep that? Where would you have found it? You wouldn't read it in the newspaper or in too many magazines or books. That stuff—

Virginia M. Yeah. Not too many Episcopalians know that an Episcopal bishop wrote, *In Defense of Slavery*, do they? So we get ashamed of ourselves, and then we tuck it away where nobody will ever know. And I know SAGE, you know, the Senior Action in the Gay Environment, tries to make clear that many people in my generation were so impressed with the fact, I mean, we were criminals in most states of the union. We were criminals! It was a criminal act we were committing. And some of them are still hiding. I mean, still so scared because they remember being a criminal. And they can't quite let go of that fear.

Doris M. So feminism started a little bit earlier than gay rights. Although I'm curious if you remember hearing about, oh, Robert Wood protesting with members of the La Mattachine Society in Washington, DC. Or other Christian clergy being active for homosexual rights.

Virginia M. No.

Doris M. In the Sixties.

Virginia M. No.

Doris M. Can you remember when you first heard about civil rights for homosexuals? Or any inkling of it going on in church circles?

Virginia M. It was [while] reading McNeill's *The Church and the Homosexual*. That really was, and knowing that Kirkridge was opening its gates to us, it was a Christian organization and it was making a safe place.

Doris M. And that was in the late Seventies.

Virginia M. Yeah. Those first meetings were like everything I've read about base communities. We were like the wounded people telling each other we were all right, telling each other, "This is not really God's will that we be treated the way we're being treated." And that was wonderful. Now my job, when I first entered that, I went as a participant the first year. And it did wonders for me. I mean, community, there's nothing like community. No amount of theorizing could have done for me what happened when I went there. Because I saw Carter Heyward and I saw John McNeill and I saw these wonderful people, about 100 people. And they were all such leaders and such wonderfully vibrant Christians. And they were gay and lesbian. And I came home and I just started to work on my closet door right then. Because I thought, I could doubt myself, [but] I could never doubt these people. Never. But when I went as a speaker, which I did the following year and have been doing it ever since, the first thing I had to do was feminism. Because these guys didn't know any oppression except being gay. They didn't have the first idea. I will still remember the year I was the woman speaker, and John Boswell of Yale was the male speaker. And his first lecture was full of androcentric language. Blah, blah, blah. On and on, you know. God, he, and everybody was "he." And I gave a lecture on inclusive language. And when it was over, I was talking to somebody over here, and I realized this angelic creature was kneeling in front of me. And it was John Boswell. I said, "Your suit is granted,"

or something like that, flippant. And he said, “I will never do that again. You have convinced me.” And the second lecture was cleaned up completely. Very smart man. He was able to just go through and change it all, just like that. And he sounded like a different man. And then later when he was going to debate Cardinal O’Connor on television [tape cut off interview, missing content supplied by interviewee during review of the transcript][he invited me to be his partner in the debate. But the debate never happened because the cardinal backed out.]

(End Tape One, Side B. Begin Tape Two, Side A.)

Doris M. Virginia, I’m afraid we might have lost a little bit then. You were mentioning your son [saying he was proud of how you were learning to love and] having sent you a Mother’s Day card. Could you say about how old he was and how long you had been reading *A Course in Miracles*?

Virginia M. Well, I had only been reading the *Course in Miracles* for a couple of months by then. I hadn’t told him or anybody that I was studying it. So the change [in me], obviously, was palpable to him. He would have been—he moved out of here to live with his father after high school, toward the last part of his senior year in high school because I couldn’t stand how late he was staying out. I could not go to bed when he was out, and I could not get up and teach the next day. (laughs) So he moved to Ringwood, which is about 20 minutes from here, and stayed with his father after that. So he was younger than that. I would say tenth grade, maybe. Something like that. And he felt a difference. And indeed, there’s been a tremendous difference. When I was living here alone [after Debra left], I hated living here alone. And yet, finally it got to the point where so many people told me they could feel the angels here, it got to the point where I’d open the door and say, “I’m home,” so the spirits would know I had arrived. (laughs) I

continue. . . do you know the book *The Power of Now?* [*The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*, by Eckhart Tolle]

Doris M. No.

Virginia M. Tolle. He's a modern mystic. But he's emphasizing the importance of staying in the here and now and the course emphasizes the same thing, *A Course in Miracles* emphasizes the same thing. And with[] that discipline, see, I can just enjoy him, [my son,] I can enjoy him today. And tomorrow, we'll worry about tomorrow tomorrow. I could never have done that. I wouldn't have been able to enjoy life. It just would have been eating, eating, eating my heart out, you know, worrying about him [and his disability]. And I wouldn't have been any support to him. Because he can tell when I'm down. He's very intuitive, too. And he would have been afraid to tell me his grief and pain.

There's a part of me that's, well, there's a part of me that's always at peace. I'm not always in touch with it. But there's a part of me that's always in peace. And I can always go there when it gets too frightening. I go there and I'm at peace again. So I thank God that I have that, you know, because who would have expected that in my seventies, you know, to be facing this, [Paul's disability or to continue loving people who reject me would have been impossible for me]

Doris M. Without—

Virginia M. Without the *Course* teaching me that I don't even know [what's going on in other people so I can't judge]. But I did read a book about the ex-gay movement recently.

Doris M. I'd like to hear about that.

Virginia M. Anything But Straight. And thank God I never got into their clutches! Of course, that movement wasn't around then. Because they always make you hunt for the trauma in your life. And that's what made you gay, see? Now once you deal with that trauma, you'll be straight. And of course, let yourself be truly Christian. Because Christ will take it right out of you. "And such were some of you. But you are washed. But you are cleansed." You know, they misuse 1 Corinthians 11 in that way. But man! I had trauma to burn, you know! (laughs) And I would have been told, "Oh, well, you know, just deal with that, and then you're going to be straight." I wouldn't have needed it. I certainly wouldn't have needed it. But this guy, a Jewish fellow who wrote it, really understands fundamentalism. I was amazed. I've never seen anybody writing out of their own—away from their own religion—who understood the religion that well. But he has gone to many, many ex-gay conferences. And he says that the vast majority of the leaders in the ex-gay movement were addicts. They were sex addicts. Many of them were also drug addicts. Also drunkards. So when they talk about a filthy lifestyle, they were living a filthy lifestyle! They were living a horrible lifestyle! And they come along and say to somebody like me, "This is a filthy life you're living." Because I love somebody, it's filthy? You know? But what they train gay people to say is. . . "Let's pray. You want to be free of gayness? Let's pray to the Lord." And they pray to the Lord. Then they raise their heads and they say, "Now you're ex-gay." "Well yes, but I have the same feelings that I always had." "Yes, but you're ex-gay." So they train them to identify as ex-gay from that moment on, no matter how much temptation they feel. So that's why there are all these people walking around claiming to be ex-gay. And then they disappear, because they've gone back to the gay life. But hopefully they've written an article--this is hopefully from the standpoint of the ex-gay movement—they've written an article which will not be repudiated when they [the publishers] know damn well they've gone back to the gay life.

Doris M. Did you have a chance to see Toby Peterson's, I think it's a one-person show about the ex-gay movement?

Virginia M. No, no, I didn't.

Doris M. At WOW 2003.

Virginia M. I didn't see that. I went to—there was an evangelical woman doing a concert, so I went to hear her.

Doris M. Right. Right. I heard it's hysterical. He did it at the General Service Conference. He's a Quaker. And so everybody is just totally laughing about it.

Virginia M. I should see it. I'd love to see it.

Doris M. Yeah, that would be terrific.

Virginia M. So anyway, that was what I got out of that book. Thank God I was never [caught in the ex-gay trap]—but I have talked to several women [who were]. This Alicia and Val who are coming here on October 21, that we were talking about. They met—Alicia was in Val's physical education class in high school, and never forgot Val. And one day she went to an ex-gay movement conference and she hears a laugh across the room and says, I know that laugh. "Val, is that you?" And they've been together ever since. So I said, "Now there's a new use! A new use for the ex-gay movement!" If you want somebody who's serious spiritually, and really wants to please the Lord, and you're the same way, but you're gay, go to an ex-gay movement [meeting] and when you find somebody, pick them off. (laughter) Alicia's one of the younger women that I think has a lot of theological gift. The questions she asks me are tremendous. So I'm mentoring her.

Doris M. Is there something that you wanted to talk about that we haven't come around to?
(tape shuts off, resumes)

Virginia M. Well I don't think we've talked enough about how much the feminist community and the lesbian community have meant to me. At Families 2000, for instance, at the National Council of Churches conference that was held in 1991, Families 2000, I guess they were looking to the future, so they held it in Chicago in 1991. And I was one of the Bible teachers. And a Cuban woman, Ophelia Ortega, was the other Bible teacher. And first two sessions, I was just wildly popular with this group of many, many of whom were pastors. So the third time up, I mentioned that I was a lesbian. Pow! Right away, the whole place was in a stew. And one black guy came to see me and said, "Just because I don't approve of you theologically, does that mean I'm not your brother?" And I said, "No, not to me." I said, "Would you, if they came to drag me away to the ovens, would you object?" "Oh, yes!" I said, "Then you're my brother. I don't need your approval. But I do need somebody to care about my humanity." And he said, "Okay, all right, all right." But the whole conference was buzzing about this. So the next morning, Ophelia Ortega gets up, she says a good word for gay people, God bless her heart. And for me. And she knew enough about solidarity from Latin America, she wasn't going to let anybody stand alone. Carter Hayward came and sat and held my hand the whole service so everybody could see that we support one another. (laughs) So it was fun. And you know, after my third presentation was over, my final presentation was on the beatitudes. And they gave me a standing ovation knowing I was a lesbian. So I thought well, you know, thank God.

Doris M. I hear two pieces of courage in that, though. Your own, for standing up with that hurt child, that expects to be rejected. And theirs for taking it in and drinking deeply.

Virginia M. Yeah, well, that's what I tend to do. If I have a series, I tend to do the first, a couple of things, just from my assumed straight persona. And then break it. See, so after I've already won them a little bit. I did it in a conference in Maine of the Northeast Clergy, United Methodist clergy. And one woman said to me afterwards, "You know, I really like you! What does that say about me?" She was worried about her own orientation. I said, "It says you have good taste. Not another damn thing." (laughs) But the bishop who was there, a man for whom I have very little respect because I've heard him lie in public, waited. He had many opportunities to talk to me during the week. He waited until it was time to say, "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord," and [then] said that I had no right to identify myself because I was not here to lecture on homosexuality [and] there was nobody here to refute me. How the hell do you refute somebody's identity, I would like to know. All I did was identify. I did not even make a pro-gay argument. I just said I was gay. And then gave some great lectures, see? (laughs) And that bozo had the nerve to do that. And, so the line-up afterwards, when he finally pronounced the benediction, was just a huge line of people who would come and whisper things to me, because I broke into tears when he said it. I was very tired.

Doris M. He said it out loud?

Virginia M. Oh, he said it to the whole group. He said, "Virginia Mollenkott had absolutely no right to identify herself. We had nobody here to refute her." So I burst into tears because it was just too much like, you know, I was tired, and it was just too much like old times, you know? And I wasn't even allowed to say who I was? So one woman leaned down over me. And I knew there were a lot of lesbians there. And the price I paid for being out at the conference was that they were afraid to be near me because their bishop was there. They were ministers. So I understood

that. But instead, I had to do couples therapy with heterosexuals the whole week. When heterosexuals know that you're a leper, they tell you all their troubles. Because they know that whatever they've done, it can't be any worse than what you are, see. (laughs) So I did couples therapy the whole damn week. And I was exhausted. But this one woman, she whispered to me. She said, "You know, there are something like 20 couples here, of us. And we're so sorry that we weren't able to be with you." And I said, "I understand that." She said, "We just want you to know that by your stripes we are healed."

Doris M. Mmm.

Virginia M.)Quietly) Wheew! (Silence)

Doris M. You know, on that theme a little bit, I do wonder, what gives you the strength to keep moving forward?

Virginia M. Well, I asked that of Nelson Mandela one time. And how could he, it was at a time when apartheid, it just seemed like it was never going to end. Not a chance. And we were doing a conference for Episcopal youth out in Denver. And, I said, "How do you keep it up? In the face of so much insult and injury." He said, "How do you keep it up?" Cause I was very openly gay, and he was listening to my lectures. I said, "Well I asked you first." And he said, "Well I'm asking you now. You tell me." And I said, "I believe that I'm in a play. And it's a divine comedy. And it doesn't matter that I'm probably not going to be on the stage when the curtain goes down. It's a comedy. It's going to end well. And my job is just to go on the stage and do whatever I'm supposed to do, and come off. When my part is done, I'll come off. But I'm in a comedy." I said, "So how do you do it?" And he said, "I believe the same thing." So that's how you do it. You just, you keep your eye on the—I don't believe Jesus would have taught us to pray, "Thy will be done

on earth as it is in heaven” as a futile exercise, as an exercise in futility. I just don’t believe that. I believe that the Lord’s Prayer will come []to pass. And so I’m in a comedy. God’s will will be done eventually on earth as it is in heaven because it’s all heaven, isn’t it, anyway, you know? It’s just, we don’t realize we’re in heaven, and a lot of it doesn’t seem like heaven, because we’ve made a big agreement among ourselves that it’s hellish down here. But fortunately, if you go to that safe place inside yourself, you can be in heaven anytime, anywhere. That’s what he was doing. And I was so thrilled when he became the head of the peace and reconciliation when apartheid ended. I just couldn’t believe it. But to me, that was a great lift. That the mountains that are moving are going to move. They are going to go into the sea.

Doris M. Was that Bishop Tutu that—

Virginia M. Yes.

Doris M. Oh, not Nelson Mandela.

Virginia M. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Yes. Okay. So we correct that. It wasn’t Nelson Mandela. I wish to God I knew Nelson Mandela as well as I do Desmond Tutu. It was before he became archbishop. It was while he was still bishop. Bishop Tutu. Sorry.

Doris M. It fits, then, doesn’t it. Episcopalian.

Virginia M. Yeah. And such happy eyes. Such wonderful, happy eyes.

But there were, you know, prayer book Episcopalians there. Even though he gave me permission to change some of the words in the prayer book, they had a fit because I changed a couple of the words. And I said at the beginning, “This is by permission of the bishop.” That should have been enough. So

fundamentalists everywhere, you know? If they can't find one thing, it will be another. And the course says that it's because we really think that we really did defy God. And we succeeded in defying God's will. And we succeeded in separating from God, which never happens, because we're not that powerful. But we think we did. And therefore, we had to find somebody worse than us. So we would go around judging people. And the day you realize you never did it, because you didn't have the strength to do it, you can relax and stop judging people. Because you don't need to find anybody worse than you. Everybody's okay. Re-imagining was a great experience for me. That was 1993.

Doris M. That was the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women's Caucus when they—

Virginia M. No, no, no, no. This was Re-imagining Conference, at which all the denominations were involved. Several thousand women came to Minneapolis to reimagine theology together. And there were people, there were speakers from Africa and all over the world.

Doris M. What year was that?

Virginia M. 1993. And the, for me, what it was was to . . . the great experience for me was to hear that the spirit had been doing in people all over the world the same things that the spirit had been doing in my heart. The same things. We were all moving. Time and again I would hear a story that would be parallel to mine. You know, they might not be gay, but they were women. And they were women in a culture where they were abused and stepped on. And then gradually they, you know, they came to life. And when you're alive, when you're coming alive, you *know* you're coming alive. That's my joy in life, to see people coming alive. Ahh! See the light come on. Ahh! So to hear that over and over again was just an amazing experience. For me and for apparently the other thousands of other women who

were there. And there were a lot of lesbian speakers. Some of us were open, some of us were not. But no point had been made about the lesbian community within the Re-imagining community. So CLOUT had been formed by then. Christian Lesbians Out Together, another organization that I'm very fond of. And they asked, one of their officers asked that there be just one thing from the plenary platform, that they be allowed to call the lesbians to come forward who could. Those who could, were open, were able to be out, to come forward. And that they all, we all sing together a song. And they got that permission. Well, I could not believe the number of women who came forward and stood all the way around the platform, three or four deep. There was a huge platform in the center of this huge meeting room.

Doris M. Wow.

Virginia M. And I never expected to see hundreds of women come forward. But the other part that was moving is that as we were moving forward, to pass all the women with tears in their eyes who couldn't come forward. I've seen that so many times. Like when I preached at Riverside Church, the Coming Out Day sermon, right before the Pride March. And they always let you leave first, everybody who's going to be in the march leaves first to get down to the parade route. And as I was coming down after preaching, just the tears. And one woman said to me, "Oh, what I would give to be where you are." And I said, "You will be, you will be. Just wait. The time will come. Wait until you're sure."

Doris M. These are like ordained women within non-accepting—

Virginia M. No. Those were women who were attending Riverside Church. I don't know what they were. But the women who were at Minneapolis, this was two different things, I skipped over to Riverside Church, to the pride sermon. But I have seen

so many times, those tears, you know, of the people who are forced to be in the closet. And I've cried them [myself, years ago]. I know where those tears come from. It's an awful price to pay, to have to stay in the closet. And yet to serve the church, alas, one of the few institutions which can still be so cruel about people's lives and loves. So in Minneapolis, that was a great moment that we all stood together. Chris Smith, one of the major preachers at the event, was a Kirkridge alumnus of the Gay, Lesbian and Christian [annual June event]. I remember years ago, sitting and talking with her way into the night. And now she's really one of the finest preachers around. She's a firebrand. I'm very proud of her. Taught at Princeton for a while, but she couldn't stand it. It's a very homophobic place. And WOW (Witness our Welcome Conference) has been a great experience for me.

Doris M. That is something, isn't it?

Virginia M. Both of them, both of them have been great experiences. Because it's ecumenical, for one thing. Now I'd like us to get [even] more ecumenical. To me, ecumenical doesn't just mean the Lutherans and the Methodists rub shoulders. It means we need lots more Catholic input at WOW.

Doris M. That's true. There's not much.

Virginia M. We need much more Catholic input. We need much more Pentecostals. Of course last time, really, that was great.

Doris M. That was something. (laughs)

Virginia M. The night that, what's her name, from San Francisco, spoke. She had the rafters ringing. She brought her transgender choir with her.

Doris M. Oh, I just heard her on the radio just a little bit ago, too.

Virginia M. I was out there, I was out at her place.

Doris M. Flunder.

Virginia M. Flunder. Yvette Flunder. The afternoon, before she spoke that night, is when I heard my father was dead. So it was everything to me to come there and just be lifted up. I felt like I was in heaven! The place was just thundering. And all the dancing [it was heaven]. And I thought well that's where Dad is, you know. It's all right. I told her that when I saw her. It's a great ministry she has out there. She came and spoke to CLOUT. We met at Mills College near San Francisco and she spoke to us. And what a vision she has! What she's doing is just amazing. Just amazing. What a loving woman, too. Did you come to the CLOUT meeting right before? So you saw me do my thing with my good friend.

Doris M. Irene.

Virginia M. Irene, yes. (laughter) Darling Irene. We were talking about that the other day on the phone. We really had a good time. As people told us how hot we were. We laughed. She was supposed to end up in my lap, kissing me. And she couldn't. She didn't have the nerve. (laughter) But I think we got it [our point] across anyway.

Doris M. That was fun.

Virginia M. Yeah. But WOW was, the first time, were you at the first one, too? Well, I did one of the Bible studies at the first one. And that was when I still was working on, trying to find a publisher for *Omnigender*. So I did it on the Book of Acts, and all

the transgender stuff in the Book of Acts. Just had the first eight chapters. There was plenty in the first eight chapters. And had a wonderful time with that group. But I would just like to see us get. . . expand the meaning of ecumenical. I guess I would like to see to be more inter-religious, too. I don't know. There's always a problem, because once you do that, everything changes. But I would love to see a worldwide, a worldwide gay and lesbian organization. Of course we are everywhere, obviously.

I don't know. My Christianity has been so strengthened by knowing people from other religions that I just can't see that it's a great danger. But a lot of Christians seem to still feel it's such a dangerous thing to do. There's no question that the complexion changes when you do that. I think we'd do well to have some leadership from people from other religions as well as our own. Anyhow, that's out of my experience.

Doris M. Are there other things that you need to, or want to share?

Virginia M. Well, the Women in Religion Conference at Harvard was very meaningful to me for several reasons. One, I didn't know that any of the mainline scholars ever knew I even existed. And it was very nice to find out that some of them did. The woman who chaired my panel, when she met me said, "You're a legend in your own time." I had no idea that she knew the first thing. But she teaches, I guess, at Harvard. And she knew. And that was very encouraging. The response to my speech was very encouraging. People stood on chairs, shouting. And I think it was partly that I talked about gender. See, that conference was very carefully organized. It was one-third older, experienced feminists in religion and scholarly types, and one-third more activist types, and one-third students. And the students were kind of upset that more wasn't done with gender. See, my belief is that we have to stop arguing, "Let us in, let us in, treat us equal, treat us equal as gay people," and realize that we are part of a very much larger movement. It's a

transgender movement. And we have to be in absolute solidarity with the intersexuals and the transsexuals and all the queers of every which type. And in my opinion, a person who's not queer in a society like this is crazy. So that's your choice: queer or crazy. Because if society is crazy, who wants to be like we're told women are supposed to be, or men are supposed to be in this society. Both men and women are betrayed by the binary gender construct. And so we really need to go after that. And there will be no justice for women anywhere in the world, or children anywhere in the world, let alone gay people anywhere in the world, until we understand that we are in a gender crisis. And we need to open up now to everybody who is queer in any way. Including those who are queer theologically. I mean, my best friends in the mainline churches are queer theologically. They know they're queer. They don't like the way the Christian church teaches people to behave.

Doris M. Can you give an example?

Virginia M. Well, they believe the things Jesus believed. Jesus was queer. You know, Jesus appealed to all the outcasts of his society. The people that I love also care about outcasts. People who don't have jobs, people who are on welfare, people who are hungry and homeless. And that's queer in this society, where consumerism is everything. So give me queer. Any day. And I'm very proud of the word. And give me anybody who wants to do away with the binary gender construct as my friend. Because it is destroying women all over the world and children all over the world. And it's not doing anything much for the men, either, I must say. To be told that you have to be in control at all times and everything is a horrible thing. To be robbed of your emotions. I was robbed of my brain, in a way. You know, they tried to rob me of my brain.

Doris M. It didn't work.

Virginia M. But that's easier to get back than to get emotions back. I know that from my incest damage. Very, very hard to deal with that emotional damage. And men have been so damaged emotionally. So, the binary gender concept is good for nobody. And it's very inaccurate. So it's just time we, what I say to the churches now is, "Wouldn't it be wiser to say 'Ah, this is what we have to deal with? The creator has chosen to do it this way. Let us learn and study and accept what we have here.'" Instead of telling the creator how She should have done things. It's very insulting. Very insulting." It's like the character in the book rising up off the [page of the] book and saying, "You should not have made me thus!" (laughter) It's the author's choice, you know?

Doris M. And your sense was that at the Harvard conference, "Transforming the Faiths of our Fathers," that the young people got that.

Virginia M. Oh, they were with it the minute I mentioned it, yeah. They were so with it. And I said I spent the last four years researching transgender issues and that I really felt that the whole gay movement needed to change its emphasis. They were very enthusiastic about that. Somebody brought it up in the panel. That's how I know the young people really felt. . . they said, "We're sorry we did not deal more with gender issues." And I said well, I've got some friends here. The young people understand. It's not a big issue to them; they just want acceptance. They just want to stop the malarkey. If somebody wants their hair purple, let them have their hair purple. And if they want to be a man one day and a woman the next, so what? If it's not hurting anybody, you know? Who's it hurting? They may look weird to you in a dress, but so what?

So that was, there were some great moments for me. And the two evangelicals who had been part of the right wing, Roberta Hestenes was one of the speakers. She's not in the booklet. She was the president of Eastern Baptist

College in Philadelphia. President of Eastern Baptist College. She has led, in the Presbyterian church, the anti-gay movement.

Doris M. Roberta Hestenes.

Virginia M. Yeah, Roberta Hestenes. She was asked, I swear, I couldn't believe it! A young woman got up and I thought, who paid her? This young woman gets up and says, "And what are your views about lesbians and gay people as a feminist?" And she, would you believe, she didn't answer that question. She went round and round and round and never answered that question. And I thought to myself, honey, if I was teaching something that I would be too ashamed to stand up at Harvard University and say "this is what I believe," I wouldn't do it anymore.

Doris M. She might be a woman in transition.

Virginia M. Well, let's hope. But I doubt it. But both of the women, there were two women there, Roberta and one other woman, a scholarly type but very [conservative], she helped to form a group for Women and Men Together. They both looked me up, that was interesting to me. They both looked me up to say that, one said I was the first truly intelligent feminist she had ever met. And I thought well, that's a slap at everybody else, isn't it? (laughs) And the other one looked me up, and she was a woman who used to turn her head away from me in an elevator or [hallway], you know. She'd look at me to make sure I knew she saw me, and then, you know, shunning, is what it's called. She wanted to tell me that my exegesis at the first {Evangelical Women's Caucus} conference was so superb. Why bother? But why bother? I think that I was so popular at the [2003 Harvard Women in Faith] conference that maybe they caught a glimpse of something else, you know, other than my gayness, which was all they ever thought about before. But I am a little something other than gay. (laughs) But that was all very interesting to me.

For me, the thrill, the biggest thrill, was to meet all the people whose books I'd read. And they were most of them there. And to hear a Mormon woman say that my work had helped her. She was thrown out of the Mormon church, she and her husband both. They were both feminist and they were thrown out for pointing out that the Mormon church had been more feminist in its inception than it was now. They were both thrown out. So I said, "Well, all I can offer you is the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women's Caucus. We don't have the Book of Mormon, but we do have the Bible." (laughs) Oh, dear. She kind of laughed. But to meet Carol Christ was a big moment for me, and Judith Plaskow. I hung with the Goddess people. And I thought that was an interesting thing, too. They were surprised. Carol said, "You're the surprise of the whole conference for me." She said, "I had no idea." I said, "Hell, I wrote an article years ago called 'An Evangelical Feminist Confronts the Goddess.'" I said, "I wasn't anywhere near as open as I am now, but at least I gave it some publicity. And spelled your name right."

Doris M. It surprises me, too, that you're as versed and as comfortable with things that I would associate, that I would imagine evangelicals would feel was devil worship.

Virginia M. No, no, no. In fact, I spoke at a conference out at Stonybrook, the University of New York at Stonybrook. And the word was going around that Wicca people would be on some of the panels. And the Presbyterians withdrew their money because this was devil worship. So I talked from the platform about it. I said it was nonsense. Absolute nonsense. Paganism originally simply referred to nature-loving people. And this is what modern day pagans are. And this is nonsense to talk this way. So that didn't make me too popular with some of the right wing. And who cares? You know? Who cares? I don't care.

Doris M. When you were not yet comfortable coming out, was that in part because you were afraid of your own job at Paterson?

Virginia M. No. At Paterson, see, once I was there, I was free to do whatever I wanted. In fact, when I came out, I was a lot more acceptable to a lot of them. Because they thought my Christianity. . . like the woman who wound up asking me to share an office when we had to share offices, said that, she didn't speak to me for the first six years I was there because she heard I was Christian. Then she heard I was lesbian, and I was all right. Because she figured well, she can't be too tight of a Christian to be lesbian. And she liked me a whole lot. We got along wonderfully for the rest of my career there. So actually it was far easier to talk about being a lesbian at a state college than it was to talk about being Christian. Because there's a real prejudice. And I could see why the black folks who wanted their kids to maintain their faith trusted me so much. Despite the fact that some of them thought it was too bad, you know, that I was gay. But at least they knew I wasn't going to be robbing their students of their faith.

Doris M. That's a big statement.

Virginia M. Yeah. I thought it was a great trust, you know? Thought it was a great trust that they sent me their students. And they'd tell them, you know, which class to sign up for. Because many of the students [] told me that they were told over at the center, African-American Center, to sign up. So that's why I had some huge numbers of black people in my classes. And Muslims. One Muslim fellow told me, I'd just assigned a book, a story written from a woman's perspective. And after we had discussed it all, he raised his hand at the end and he said, "You know, Dr. Mollenkott, before I read this story and we had this discussion, I didn't know a woman had a point of view." The class all *gasped*. And I said, "I thank you, sir, for your honesty. That took tremendous courage to say that in front of a

class full of people.” Of course that shut the ones up who were gasping and carrying on about it. I said, “So now you do know. And remember it when you have a wife, if you have a wife. Remember it when you’re dealing with women. Yes, we have a point of view.” (laughs) I said, “They will thank me for that someday.” (laughing)

Doris M. *He* will thank you for that someday. Did you do much work or talking with other Wiccans in other situations? Or any networking? Or were they part of the Ecumenical--

Virginia M. Yeah, in fact a group, Suzannah, my current, my partner for the rest of my life, with whom I am now, we kid ourselves, we’re registered domestic partners. RDPs. (laughter) Her former lover was Wiccan. And when she was consecrating herself as a Wiccan priestess, she looked me over for quite a while when I was living in Durham, and finally she said, “Yes, I would like you to be part of the 13 who are at my consecration.” She wanted to make sure I wasn’t going to, you know, rain on the parade. So I enjoyed it very much. We had a wonderful evening together. And that afternoon, I asked, I don’t usually try to address the dead directly, you know. Whenever it’s happened, it’s happened through psychics. But that particular afternoon, I guess knowing I was going to this Wiccan thing, I said, “Could I speak to you, Joan of Arc? Can I speak to you?”

Doris M. Your forebearer.

Virginia M. Yes. I said, “I just want to know, how was it in the flames? Because I think a lot about death.” And the answer I got, again, not words I could hear outside, but in my mind, and [yet] not the product of my own mind--I can sense the difference—was, “The flame didn’t hurt at all compared to denying my voices. Never deny your voices.” So I thought that was a nice thing.

But because Suzannah had been with her, Suzannah had read and studied a lot of Wicca. And also, Suzannah had founded in Durham, a women's spirituality group. And women's spirituality groups, whether they know it or not, I mean, they go Wiccan. Just boom, like that. (laughs) And so I went with her, of course, to her spirituality group. And we did all the rituals and so on together. And I loved it. I enjoyed it very much. So they were all essentially Wicca. And Native American is practically the same thing for all practical purposes. So very nature-oriented. We did the four directions. But heck, one time, the first time I ever [honored] the four directions was at a Mennonite conference. Positively; I kid you not. So when she did the four directions with me, I knew about this. And I had read, of course, Starhawk, and seen all of that in there. What's the damage? What's the [damage of honoring the natural world all around us?]

(End Tape Two, Side A. Begin Side B.)

Doris M. Virginia, you were talking about some of the lectures that you've given around at various campuses and seminaries.

Virginia M. Yeah. Well, at one point I was invited to Eastern College. They were going to have a conference on life—what did they call it? “Sacredness of Life.” And of course, a lot of it was going to be about abortion. They said, “We want to have a complete spectrum.” It turned out I was the spectrum. I was the one and only pro-abortion rights speaker in the whole damn thing. (laughs) They sat me down on the panel right next to the Right to Life president, who was black, at the time. Well, unfortunately for a lot of people, I guess, we liked each other. So she told me secretly afterwards that they would be satisfied if they could just get [abortion outlawed in the] second trimester and thereafter. That that's really what they wanted. That they were going to go for the whole hog, but only so they could back away to the second trimester. And that she never had heard any feminist talk the way I did. I did not say the baby was just a cancer in the body that a woman

had a right to get rid of. See? That's what they think we [say]. That's the way they think feminists talk. I never heard a feminist say that anytime in my entire life. Not that bad, you know? But you know, my argument was that you can't be a moral agent if you don't have control over your own destiny. You have to be able to make your choices if you're going to have to stand before God and be judged for them. You certainly have to have the right to say what you're going to do. Otherwise, you've taken moral agency away. But that was another audience. They tried their darnedest. They liked a lot of what I said, and they couldn't get over that I wouldn't come one more step, see. And I said, "I'm sorry, I cannot take moral agency away from my sisters. I need it myself, and I can't take it away from my sisters."

Doris M. When you were in these situations, were there people there who were supportive of you? Were there friends you were traveling with? Or did you find yourself going to conferences to speak as a single—

Virginia M. Sometimes my lover would go with me, you know, just as friends, you know. Before I was out. A lot of the time I was alone. But I had a youth that trained me for that. I was used to getting it from every angle and having no where to turn. I left early from that conference, that Right to Life conference because it was [featuring] one of those people who did the break in—I can't think of his name [Chuck Colson]—he became very active in pro-life circles afterwards. The Watergate break in. He went to jail; I can't think of his name.

Doris M. Do you mean Watergate or do you mean the one in Buffalo?

Virginia M. I mean Watergate. No, I mean Watergate. He was working with Nixon. And he became very active in pro-life circles after that. After he got right with God and all that. You know, out of prison and all that. (laughs) I thought it was kind of

funny. But even at that very conference, Lew Smedes, who has written Sex for Christians and other books, the reformed theologian, said to me that he had just read my book Speech, Silence, Action and he said he praised me for keeping to myself that which should be kept to myself. In other words, staying in the closet. That was a book that was published in 1980 and I was still closeted.

Doris M. Because they like Speech, Silent, Action, the message, but they didn't want—

Virginia M. But he read through the lines, between the lines, that I was gay. And having met me, he knew I was gay. And he praised me for [being silent]—so that's the kind of pressure that goes onto gay people. However, I was also getting a lot of pressure from the [gay folks—I was doing a lot of work with the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches [MCC]. Because as soon as Is the Homosexual My Neighbor? was published, Troy Perry brought the book into the mother congregation and praised it, and so on. And told everybody to go out and get it. And of course when I would meet various people from the MCC, various places, they would ask me, "Why aren't you out?" At first they gave me all kinds of accolades because I was straight. I used to say, "Don't make assumptions." But that was as much as I could say. And then they would put the pressure on that I should be out. And one time when I was at a conference with Troy—

Doris M. When was this? About '78, '79?

Virginia M. Yeah. Shortly after the publication of the book. Maybe in '80, '81, even. Troy, when he was hugging me, said, "We need you exactly where you are." Well, that was very helpful. See, what he was saying was okay, you know, there is such a thing as staying in the closet in order—what I was doing was staying in the closet, A, until I got the Holy Spirit's okay that I could do it calmly and quietly and

happily, and not hostilely. But B, I was trying to build myself a reputation that I would never have gotten—never!—would I have been invited to be on the National Council of Churches Lectionary Committee, had they know I was gay? I doubt it. But more than that, would I have been invited to be on the translation committee of the New International Version of the bible? That's the evangelical version. I was on it the whole time. The whole eight or nine years it took to do the translation. I wasn't translating, 'cause I don't know Hebrew and Greek. But I was doing the English consultation.

Doris M. Do you think Troy knew that? Troy doesn't have a seminary kind of background?

Virginia M. No. Troy's very, he's very Pentecostalist, you know, and there's a big class thing there. I frankly think it's as much class as homosexuality that has kept the National Council from accepting the MCC into full fellowship. There's a big class thing. But Troy does know a good scholar when he sees one. And he's been very, very, very, very nice to me throughout the years. And that was tremendous help to me. Because he knew they were putting the screws on me to come out. And you know, from him, who has suffered so much for being out, to be told, "We need you exactly where you are" was a huge help.

And then, of course, since then, I took my stand with them. When we presented the lectionary to the National Council of Churches, that was the same meeting—it was over in Hartford, Connecticut—it was at the same meeting where they were again going to vote on whether or not to bring the UFMCC into the National Council. And I knew that. And I said to the people who were in charge of the program, I said, "Look, if you put me on that platform I will express my support of the MCC, because I am not going to stand there and deny my sisters and brothers, my gay sisters and brothers. I will tell them I'm gay, and I will tell them I support the MCC. And that they need the MCC in the National Council of Churches." And they said, "You say what you have to say." So I did it. And was

surprised at how many people could have known me and [yet had] not known. Nancy Wilson, who has become a great friend of mine, I think she may well now become. . . he [Troy] stepped down now, and she may well become the new president of the denomination. There was another experience. You know, the UFMCC has to have guards all the time. Because one of their churches was burnt in such a way that everybody in it was killed, down in New Orleans. They've been through so much. So they have guards at all times. And at their worship services for the first time I was frisked, ever frisked, going into a worship service. And it was the first time I ever was told, "Everybody look under your chair, because there's been a bomb threat. Look under your chair, make sure there's nothing there." And so forth, you know? So it really was quite a sense of the oppression that went on. And even the police in New Orleans, when they were checking on that fire, said, "Well, the fruits really got it this time." They were joking about all those people who were burnt to death! Anyhow, Nancy Wilson and I were in a hallway [in Hartford], talking, at that conference where we were releasing the lectionary, and where I took my stand with the MCC. And all of a sudden she said—of course, we had the death threats by then—so there were, it's a lot of security in the hotel. She said, "Don't say anything, and don't do anything strange. Just get on the elevator and don't ask me why." So! Whoosh!! Debra and I got on the elevator and got the hell out of there. (laughs) And later she told us that there was a man who had just come in to the other end of the hallway with his arm in a long sling. And that's one of the ways they carry rifles. And she immediately got police security and everything. And I never would have known that.

Doris M. Oh my God.

Virginia M. She had lived with that for so long. She just went right into that mode, you know. Just you hear that tone of voice and you know you just do what you're told.

(laughs) The MCC ultimately gave me an honorary doctorate, too. For my support of them. But geez, they were just as supportive of me. I love that denomination.

Doris M. They're full of life.

Virginia M. Yeah, that's why the NCC needs them. A lot of those denominations need a good shot in the arm. (laughs)

Doris M. You said that at Kirkridge, you got to know John McNeill a little bit.

Virginia M. Yes.

Doris M. And I saw that you presented with him for many years.

Virginia M. Oh, many years. Yeah. They called us the deans of the event. Not wanting to be ageist, of course. (laughs) They could call us the grandmother and grandfather. Yeah, I did. The first time I heard him was with—he and Carter were celebrating [communion] at Kirkridge. And he—Carter prayed over the—he prayed over the bread and she prayed over the wine. And when she was done, he prayed over the wine again. And when he was finished, Carter and every woman in the place had their fist up. Because it was obvious that he thought it wasn't really [consecrated] until he did it. Because he was really a priest, and she was just a renegade Episcopalian priest, and a woman at that. So that's what I mean when I say I had to first go in as a feminist. And teach *that*. Teach human equality first to these guys. That it wasn't enough to be "justice for just us," that's what I call it. Instead, it has to be justice for everybody. And that means they had to side with their sisters. And those who could stand that stuck it out. Those who couldn't, fine, you know. Let them depart.

Doris M. The man who couldn't stand it.

Virginia M. Men who couldn't stand it, right.

Doris M. I think it was probably the other way around in that a lot of lesbians left [gay dominated organizations] and some of the mainline denominational LGBT groups found themselves asking why women wouldn't come.

Virginia M. That's right. Integrity, for instance. Integrity New York became almost entirely male. Well, I could tell them why. They had me come and preach for their tenth anniversary. And I swear, they all were parading around in their big sacerdotal robes. And they didn't know what to do with me, 'cause I was the preacher but I wasn't ordained. So they finally put this red cape around me. I felt like a fool, you know. But I went along with it. They love pomp and circumstance, these guys. They love opera and all that. So we blahed [sic] around the church. And when it was all over and they were just, oh, full of themselves, the bells and the smells, they had the incense and all that, they said to me, "What did you think of it?" I said, "What I thought of it doesn't much matter." I said, "I think God is laughing her head off. Because all of the show doesn't matter to her. What matters to her is justice, justice, justice." Well, they weren't real happy with that answer. But they got it. Because they hadn't learned. And that's why women left. Women know that it's about justice. Human justice. And the guys, the minute they get any kind of little power, it seems to go to their heads. Pomp and circumstance starts. Now, that's not entirely fair. A lot of them are very sweet. And very justice oriented, too. But it took a while. And what I'm saying is, it took a while for them to learn that. And unfortunately somebody hasn't been saying it often enough, loud enough, in some of the organizations for that to occur. I understand Dignity is largely male, also. Women just don't have time.

Doris M. Where did women go? Did women leave Christianity?

Virginia M. Yes. Yeah, they did what Mary Daly suggested. They decided that religion was the enemy and they're going to have to choose between themselves and their own experience and their experience of what was good—and religion. They were going to walk. And they did. I remember what Suzannah told me, the first time she heard me. She had been at a drumming weekend and I was speaking in Durham, near Durham--it's an Episcopal campground. But the women's resource center for women in the South [Resource Center for Women and Ministry in the South was meeting there, in Brown Summit].

Doris M. Yes. And I think that they are specially organized to support women ministers in the South.

Virginia M. That's right. That's right. And I was [speaking there, after that time I had lost Debra. So what I did was, I did something unusual. I did a dialogue between Hagar and God. Hagar and her deep self. And then I did the dialogue and second speech between myself and my Sophia, my deep self. My woman wisdom. And Suzannah said, "You know, you weren't ten minutes into your speech before I thought to myself, 'I can have the Bible back.'" Because she had, like so many others, had thought well, if it really says what they say it says, I'm out of here, you know? It was part of the attraction between us, that she wanted that and I certainly want to give that to people. (Pause) I said to the woman who invited me down there, "Are any lesbians going to be there?" She says, "Oh..." I said, "Well, I'd like a meeting with the lesbian[s]." So about half the conference showed up. (laughs) And I said, "These are the lesbian[s]?" "Yeah, yeah!" So I poured my heart out to them. I told them all about everything: my pain, my loss. And there was a Wicca woman there, [a Unitarian] Universalist minister. And she said,

“Virginia, you know you talk like that sixteen years was a loss.” She said, “A relationship is not a loss just because it ends.” Nobody ever had said that to me. I thought that was wonderful. I felt so great! And I immediately began to study more Wicca. You know, anybody that smart, anybody with that kind of wisdom, has got to have something to offer me.

Doris M. I was wondering if it was mutual. If somehow during this process women came to be a support for you.

Virginia M. They did. Oh, absolutely. And part of losing Debra was I had always thought of ministry as something I gave to others. And at that same conference, a woman had us all hold hands around a circle and taught us that if you put your hand above, you are taking control and you’re giving. And if you put your hand under this way [palm turned down]—so I always took hands this way. Always! And she said, “Be sure your one hand is one way and one hand the other way, so that you’re passing things on.” And I, because I was so broken, I was open to where anybody would be able to help me. Help me, help me! Help me! I’m drowning! And people did! And that’s the first time in my life, I found out that the support system would be there. Now there were some women who were very scared, too. Because many lesbian women really fear to lose their partner so badly that they are afraid it’s catching. But there were enough that year at Sisterly Conversations, more people turned out for that year than ever. And that had to be a show of support, you know?

Doris M. You mean at Kirkridge.

Virginia M. Yeah. Because the word had gotten around, you know? And some of the gay guys. I had sent words the first time I went. They only knew me with her, with Debra. And I had sent word to Kirkridge, “Please don’t bring it up. I don’t want to

be crying all over the place.” They didn’t bring it up. But some of the guys would come up. One guy came up and he said, “Virginia, you held me when my partner died. Can I hold you?” You know. So sweet. So that’s what I learned. That ministry is not just giving; ministry is also receiving. And I must say, my energy level is much better. Considering that I’m an old lady now, my energy is much better than I would have ever expected it to be in my seventies. Because I take energy as well as give it. And people are wonderful to me. Wonderful. Even down at the post office, people are wonderful to me. It’s amazing.

Doris M. I always thought, like you, that being a crone meant giving. But I can see, too, that it’s about being, I almost want to use the word “weak,” but it’s not quite the right sense of the word. It’s being open to whatever it is that makes us human, that we need to open our hearts for receiving.

Virginia M. I know some of the young women who come here, I can detect that they feel like they have to do something [for us], you know. They want to come here to be mentored—I do mentoring. I do a lot of mentoring for people who are in seminary and stuff. And I know theological gift when I see it, and I always tell the woman, “Do it. Do theology if you’re interested at all.” So one of them is Carter’s star student up at Cambridge now. And so on. So she’s one of the ones who thinks of me as a mother. But I always tell them, you know, this is not one-way. We need your energy. And you need our wisdom. But this is a two-way street. And a wonderful thing to share with each other.

Doris M. Before we get too far, there’s one person you wrote about, a woman being important in your life, that I’d like to hear more about. Her name was Inge Lederer Gibel?

Virginia M. Gibel. [accent on second syllable]

Doris M. Gibel.

Virginia M. Yeah, she was the program chair of the American Jewish Committee. And when Jean Audrey Powers was responsible for bringing me into ecumenical circles in the first place so that the National Council of Churches knew about me and so on, she invited me to an ecumenical conference, a National Council of Churches conference. And I'm forever grateful to her for that. And then she also saw to it that I was invited to Women of Faith in the Eighties, which met all during the Eighties at the American Jewish Committee headquarters in Manhattan. And Inge was the program chair and also the one who had organized this committee. So we had some Christian, both Catholic and Protestant people, and Jewish women of all the four denominations of Judaism, [and a Muslim woman]. And we would just discuss various issues together. And Inge's the one who taught me not to say interfaith. She taught me that faith, there's one experience called faith, and you know when you meet somebody who's had it. Cause there's a look in their eye. And I sure do. I know to watch for that look. And it's the same as—I had spent a lot of my youth reading mystic [books], when I got old enough to understand things like that. There's a lot of mystics at the head of your bed down in the guest room. You'll see. I read mystics from every which tradition. And I noticed that they strengthened my faith tremendously because it didn't matter whether you were Muslim or Christian; once you had a direct experience of God, you knew God was Love. And not judgmental. And this was tremendously helpful to me. So that gave me courage, you know. I was a little scared because of my background, my training. You know, I might betray Christianity by getting too enamored of Judaism, for instance. Which I am—very enamored of Judaism, in many ways. I love the Jewish perspective. But Inge said, "It's religions that differ. It's the superficial that differs. So say *inter-religious* dialogue, not *interfaith* dialogue." And I always have. And then I went one step further, because of my friend

Frederick Franck, the artist who has *Pacem in Terris*, a place of meditation nearby here, up in Warwick. And Frederick's word was "transreligious," and I like that even better. Transreligious solidarity. So I use that in the subtitle of my book *Omnigender—A Transreligious Approach*. But to me, it's essential to the welfare of the human race that we learn to respect that which is valuable in other people's religions. And not do these murderous things that we're doing in the Middle East and so on.

Doris M. It's a long way from the kind of fundamentalism you were raised with.

Virginia M. Yes, indeed. And I told Inge, you know, "I come from evangelicalism. And there are a lot of evangelicals who are not your friends. And you think they are because they say they pray for the peace of Jerusalem. But they're your friends because they think that when Jerusalem is at peace, then Jesus will come and take them all out of here. (laughs) This is not real friends, you know. They think you're going to fry in hell." She said, "I know, I know. But we take what friends we can get, where we can get them." (laughter) So it was a great friendship. She went to Israel eventually so that kind of ended our seeing each other and stuff. But one day I was chairing the committee, chairing the Women of Faith thing, and that's where I met Riffat Hassan, a Muslim.

Doris M. Say more about her as you go.

Virginia M. We continue to be very good friends, Riffat and I. She's from Pakistan. And I have often worried about her getting shot in her tracks. Cause she's just a vibrant feminist. She heads the religion department at the University of Kentucky. You know, she knows I'm gay. Inge knows I'm gay. Could matter less to them. But I was sitting at the head of the table when one of the nuns—we were discussing whether or not to have our meeting again at the 4-H Club in Washington, where

we had had our first Inter-religious Conference—and Inge said to the group, “Well, I kind of hesitate to go there because they refuse to allow gay people to hold their conferences there. And I don’t think we want to be associating with anyplace like that.” And this nun says, “Well, we don’t care about those people!” And Inge looked at me, and I was just wondering whether to say anything or not. I was just, you know, I felt stabbed— “We don’t care about those people!” So I kept my mouth shut, because I was chairing the meeting. And afterwards, when I took Inge home, she said, “That must have been terribly hard for you.” I said, “Woo!” She said, “Well, she doesn’t know much.” A couple of years later, the very same nun wanted me to go—she worked constantly in the Soviet Union, trying to get the Jews out of the Soviet Union. Because the Catholics had a very good support network. And they could come in there and let the Soviets know that the world was watching. And the Soviets would frequently let Jews go, because they were very embarrassed about [negative] world opinion. But. . . and she was a funny lady. She said one time that she was very glad she had Jewish as well as Christian friends, because if she got incarcerated, the Christians would pray that she would learn a lot while she was in prison, and the Jews would get her the hell out of there. (laughs) Which is true. But anyhow, she asked me to go with her to the Soviet Union on one of these trips. She thought I’d be a real asset to the group. I said, “Oh, my dear. You don’t know, but I’m one of those people.” Well she went. . . you talk about ashen. She was so sorry. She didn’t realize. I said, “It doesn’t matter whether you know somebody is present. You’re hurting somebody when you say things like that.” And I was glad that I had waited, because it gave me this much more important opportunity to make connections. We hugged, embraced. And she let it go. You know, she’s given her life for people. She’s a very brave woman. And I didn’t want to be on the outs with her. I wanted her to grow up, you know. Learn that there are various forms of oppression—and I think she did. I think she did. And that she was admiring somebody who was gay [but] didn’t know it.

Doris M. Were there difficulties embracing people from other faiths because of your own upbringing?

Virginia M. Initially, a little bit of fear. But then I've had fear so many times, you know, to accept myself, to tell other people that they're okay, they're not going to hell. There will always be the little flashback of "ooh," you know. And I've had gay people ask me, "Aren't you afraid that you're wrong? Aren't you ever afraid that you're wrong?" And I would say, "Well, you know, I did use to go through that. And I don't anymore. I have complete peace about it now." But it would encourage them. The [doubts] wouldn't last forever if they continued to trust. Continued to trust. It's {God's} grace that brought us safe thus far, and grace *will* take us home, will lead us home. So I'm glad that. . . I did have to go inch by inch. And my inch with that was of course that, "Well how can these people, they don't believe in Jesus as their personal savior, how can it be that Inge is going to heaven?" And I've heard it when I've been lecturing. I knew a Lutheran woman who was very accepting about gayness, but she couldn't stand for me to say that Inge was going to heaven. "Inge's a Jew!" she said. "How can you say that?" I said, "Jesus was a Jew, too. Don't tell me that." (laughs) So it's very hard for some people. And it was a little bit frightening to me. I thought, am I going to betray my Christianity? But what I did was deepen my Christianity. Because listening to other views [deepens one's own]; and also Thomas Merton helped me tremendously. I read all of his works. That's a lot, let me tell you. He wrote a lot. Published a lot. And the fact that he was so into Buddhism and it enriched his Christianity. That's exactly the experience I had in inter-religious dialogue. I became more and more relaxed with it. And now I encourage people [to engage in it]. Because they'll only come away richer. Just so everybody's talking about their own experience and nobody's trying to rob, you know, anybody else of theirs.

Doris M. I wonder, there's an effort, or there was a pretty strong movement toward what I call ecumenicalism in—probably just the early Eighties, or something around then that I can see. Did that grow out of a need for LGBT people to find other—

Virginia M. You're talking about in the gay community?

Doris M. No, I'm talking about in the religious community. If LGBT issues turned out to be a force creating an effort toward ecumenicalism? Or if it was part of the larger culture. Part of the way that religions as a whole were moving.

Virginia M. Yeah, I would say more that, the latter. Yeah. More the latter. Yeah. And I'm sorry that the ecumenical movement seems not as strong as it used to be. 'Cause God knows, if this so-called War on Terror doesn't tell us that we need to change our ways about other religions, I don't know what will. And it's not just American Christianity versus—so-called Christianity—versus [Islam]. Some Muslims are just as terrible. And Muslims who wouldn't be terrorists, but who do think that we're wrong. And we just have to stop thinking that our approach, our attempts to relate to God, are [so right that everyone else is] wrong. Just as John McNeill taught me, do not put down anybody's attempt to relate to other people. But do not put down anybody's attempt to relate to God, either. Because the Holy Spirit has different ways of dealing with different people. And it's not for me to make judgments. C.S. Lewis helped me in The Last Battle. He certainly was not [liberal], he was pretty right-wing in many ways, but The Last Battle talks about—there were people who worshiped [God] by another name, and they, too, are acceptable. And back then I was pretty fundamentalist. It was a help to me, helped me open up. I remember one day I was sitting at Nyack. This was before the time I was in the inter-religious dialogue. I was sitting in the Nyack chapel, and I was thinking about 1st Corinthians 13. Thinking about the fact that it said, "Knowledge will pass away, but love is eternal." And I made a vow to myself that

day that I will never allow doctrine, which is just knowledge or theory, to cause me to do something unloving to another human being. Not if I can possibly help myself. Because I want to do the eternal thing. I don't want to put my stock in what's going to pass away.

So I'm astonished at the people who want to be married, and don't want me to be able to be married. I mean, why would you want for yourself what you don't want for other people? Where is Christ in that? It shocks me. I recently did a radio show for Minnesota Public Radio on gay marriage ["Speaking of Faith," May 13, 2004].

Doris M. Was it, do you remember what the series was?

Virginia M. "Speaking of Faith."

Doris M. Oh, I like that, don't you? Well, in fact, I heard you on it.

Virginia M. You heard that show?

Doris M. Mmm hmm.

Virginia M. Well, when I heard it, we can't get it right here on our radio. So I first heard it on the computer. I now have some CDs of it, which they sent me. (sighs) I cried. See, fortunately, what they did for me and for him, I guess, they rented a studio. And each of us did our thing separately. They did him first. And I raised hell about that. I said, "This is so typical! That the normative group goes first and sets the stage. And then I have to answer what Richard Mouw said. And I don't like it. I should have gone first, and he should have had to answer what I said. And it would have been an entirely different program." But when I heard it, when I heard him talking, and all that sweet, lovey, gushy stuff that he said, but basically what

he was saying was the same shit I heard in high school: “You’re going to hell if you keep this up. And I’m so sorry, I love you so much, but I have to tell you, I love you so much.” And I cried. From the minute I heard it, I thought, “Thank God we weren’t in the same studio.” Because I wouldn’t have been able to keep my cool. I just wept. He’s at Fuller, you know, and that’s evangelical.

Doris M. Isn’t he at Calvin [College, Michigan]?

Virginia M. He was. But now he’s president of Fuller Seminary. And he had called me his friend in *Christianity Today*, but he called me his friend in the same paragraph where he’s saying that everything I presented at Calvin was “off the charts.” Well, you see, when you’re normative, you can say that somebody else’s evidence is off the charts, and you don’t have to answer individually any of the arguments that they gave. You’re a normative, so you say it’s off the charts and everybody says, “Oh, well we don’t have to listen to Mollenkott. She doesn’t know anything. She’s off the charts.” I thought, boy, some friend you are! So I wrote him about it. And I wrote him about the show. I said, “You just took me right back to when I tried to kill myself.” And he never even answered me. So that’s the friend he is. That’s how much of a friend he is. Never wrote back. And she wrote to him, too, the producer. She said she had the same reaction. She wept and wept and wept when she was producing the show. So, well, okay, we have the same experience here. It stirred up a lot of pain in her—

Doris M. That was very recently, too.

Virginia M. Yes, it was, very recently. I was very surprised. I thought I was inured to all of that. Because I don’t believe a word of it. I wasn’t crying over that. I was crying that anybody could be that cruel. And I was crying for my youth. I was crying that I didn’t cry then. I was crying that I didn’t know I could cry then. I was crying

that I didn't know I had anything to cry about then. It was good. In the long run, it was a good thing. She was kind of sorry she got me into it. I said, "Oh, no, no, no. I think I had to go back and do some healing." And right after that, I had a dream in which I was with my lover from when I was eleven, and my mother barged into the room. Well, you see, this is history. She had no boundaries. She barged into the room and I said, "Mother, I'm sorry, but I love her and I'm staying with her." So I knew that I was going back and healing stuff. And you know, I never would have dared that. I was going back and taking care of some business that needed to be cared for. And largely as a result of hearing all that again. What a pretense of love: "I love you, I don't like anything about you. I don't like your love nature. But I love you." What do you love, you know? What's there to love? (laughs) I mean, my love nature is right there at the center of who I am. You don't love that, you don't love me.

Doris M. That's a deep one.

Virginia M. Yeah. And she said that she thought that my talking about the one flesh, the way I talked about one flesh, she was just so moved by that. And she felt that—that the whole show was worth putting that out on the air.

Doris M. I couldn't agree more. I remember being very moved by what you said.

Virginia M. So it was a good thing in the long run.

Doris M. Maybe but you know, that sense of healing is a good thing, too.

Virginia M. Oh, yes. Oh, absolutely. I didn't know enough to side with myself, see? So I had a very wounded child in there. After Deb left, we had been doing couples therapy. And after she left, I continued on with that therapist to try to deal with everything.

And she said, “We have to deal with your incest damage.” I said, “Okay, let’s do it now, because I’m miserable anyway. So let’s just do it.” (laughter) And so we did. But she said to me at one point, “You know, Virginia, if somebody shoots you, the first thing you do is not try to understand why they shot you. The first thing you do is get help. So you don’t die.” That was news to me. I mean, now you would think that was just nothing you needed to teach a sixty-four year-old woman. But I did need to hear it. I did need to hear it. Because that’s my first impulse—to try to understand why it happened. First impulse after I got beaten up by those kids, understand why they beat me. (Pause) First impulse has got to be some self-defense.

Doris M. I think that’s authentic, too.

Virginia M. Yeah.

Doris M. We haven’t talked much about *A Course in Miracles*. I wonder if you want to put that into the picture somehow.

Virginia M. I certainly would like to, yes. What feminism did for me was teach me to trust my experience. And that was partly through reading feminist books, but partly also through a series of big dreams I had, in which I was shown—I would always expect that the interpretation would be a beating. I would be getting a beating from God. And it would turn out to be the most beautiful, affirming dream. It happened to me again and again and again. I would think, oh God, I got it this time. Like once I dreamed I was the fool in the tarot pack. So I thought oh well, okay, so God’s telling me I’m a big ass, you know. And then, the more I studied the fool, oh my goodness, you know, this is pretty wonderful stuff. And my shortcomings are here, but also my strengths are here. So it was one dream after another in which I gradually came to trust that which was coming out of the deep

core of myself. Did you read my book Sensuous Spirituality? I think I describe this dream in it. I was in a bus and I was forced to get out and told to go down to the center of the woods. But there were lions and dragons and tigers at the edge of the woods. And so I was afraid. But I finally pierced it and went down. And in the depths of the woods, there were these gorgeous gazelles dancing around a pole. And there was a spotlight on the pole. And this is my personality. I worked with this psychologist. They said, “This is your personality. Yes, you have damage. Get below the damage and there’s this gorgeous internal being.” Eternal dance going on around the tree of life, which is the pole, the center of the universe. So through that, and through reading the feminist books, I came to trust my own experience. And that was vital. And bring me back to the question you asked me.

Doris M. You mentioned how important *A Course in Miracles*—

Virginia M. *A Course in Miracles*, okay. But above all, it was that in the early Seventies, almost as soon as it was available—it was available in mimeographed form, a friend of mine gave me a copy of *A Course in Miracles*. And I sat up all night and read. Started with the teachers’ manual, cause I was a teacher. It was the wrong place to start, but that’s all right. And I thought, well, here’s salvation for me. And you know, it purports to have been dictated by Jesus, and I wasn’t sure I believed that. But so what. I will take it, the truth, if it seems true to me, I will go with it. And if it doesn’t seem true to me, I will lay it aside. And boy, it seemed more and more true. And I began to study it in connection with scripture. And I began to see more and more of the things Jesus said were jiving with this, you know? And sometimes in the *Course in Miracles* it would say, “People make the cross the center of things. The cross was only to take you to the resurrection. The emphasis is in the wrong place.” And just one thing after another that I came to see, well that’s the truth! It was an execution. It was a political execution. Why are we acting like that’s the reason we worship somebody? A lot of people have died

horrible deaths from political opposition. That's not what made Jesus unique to the degree that he was unique. It was that he came to show us something about our Oneness with the Father/Mother. So gradually—it's really a mind training course. It teaches you to take responsibility for every mood. Well that was hard for me. Boy! Because about once a month or so, I would get in a funk. It was incest damage. I don't get in the funk any more from it. But I didn't want to admit that, how could that be my fault, you know? But fault is not the issue. And that's what the *Course* taught me. And that I was going to see out there whatever I saw in here. And so I needed to learn to see in here beauty if I wanted to see it out there. And I must say, I began to experience it. I began to experience more and more of a sense of beauty and love and joy around me. And so I thought well, there must be something to this. So I've been studying it now for God knows how many years. And my son wrote me a Mother's Day card saying he was so proud of me, the way I was learning to love. But that's not really. . . what the *Course* teaches is you don't have to learn to love. You [tape ends] [just have to remember that your are love, and work on removing your blockages to love.]

(End Tape Two, Side B. Begin Tape Three, Side A.)

Doris M. Virginia, we were just in the middle of talking about your experience with Wiccans and women's spirituality. And I'm just wondering how friendly those two perspectives are when, I guess I'm wondering if Christians and Wiccans are as comfortable with each other as women who are lesbian and Christians are with Wiccans.

Virginia M. As women who are lesbians?

Doris M. If lesbian is the common denominator between—for you—between Wiccans and your Christian beliefs.

Virginia M. I think feminism is the common denominator, whether lesbian or not. I have met lesbian women who are very, very narrow-minded Christians. And they don't like that Christianity hasn't been accepting of their lesbianism, but anything else, they're just as tight [narrow] as anybody I ever met in my life. So it isn't. . . the cleavage is not between being lesbian or not; it's whether or not you are genuinely feminist— and by that, I mean truly a believer in human equality and truly open to all kinds of diversity. To me, you're not really a feminist—and I know there are all kinds of culture wars over that—but I question whether you're truly a feminist if you are willing to deny some of your sisters their rights or if you're willing to, you know, pass judgment on segments of the human race. That doesn't seem to me what feminism, what I was taught, originally, feminism was all about. So there's where the cleavage is. And feminism taught me that the personal is political. And God knows my life taught me that the personal is political. But yeah, I've met lesbians who don't see any reason to do anything other than have their own little life in their little cocoon. And you and me, darling, against the world. And I think Jesus did everything in his power to teach us something different. I think the whole. . . Paul's use of the church as a symbol of marriage, that [image] says that your marriage should open you up to the whole world. Not close you down so that you don't give a damn what happens to all the other lesbians, let alone all the other women, let alone all the other human beings out there. So I think the real difference, the real cleavage, is between those who are feminist, feministically aware, and they're willing therefore to hear their sisters, what their sisters' experience is. The other thing about feminism is it teaches you to honor experience. Not just theory. Because theory is so often patriarchal. And you have to—you know, before you drink out of your own well, you better find out how much pollution has been put into it. (laughter) And do some work on

some of the pollution in that well before you drink too deeply of your own well. So I think once you have truly come to that point where you recognize your damage, you've worked on your damage, you're not just in a movement in order to express your own rage that you've never dealt with in other ways, because I have certainly met some women who were just taking their rage, waiting for a place to rage.

Doris M. Yep.

Virginia M. And that's unfortunate. But I want to say that once a woman has really dealt with some of her damage—we're all damaged enough that we're still in process—but once that process has begun and gotten a little ways in there, then she's willing to listen to the other sisters. And that's when whether she's lesbian or not doesn't make any difference. As she will be open. I got up at the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women's Caucus and said that Starhawk's novel The Fifth Sacred Thing was the most Christian book I ever read. I never read anything more Christian than that in my whole life. And that was beautifully received. People wanted to know more about where to get the book and so forth. And what was the fifth sacred thing? And all of that. So I talked about the four directions, and then the center, which is the spirit. And they were hot with it. Because they're real feminists. And some of my best friends are not lesbians, but they're accepting. More than accepting. They love, they love lesbian women. And that's a wonderful thing. I mean, my lesbian friends are great, but my straight friends are great, too. And in another way, you know? They would go to the barricades, like that Cindy Crouner you talked to out at Kirkridge. She'd go to the barricades any day for her gay sisters. And she's not [gay] at all. So. It's a beautiful thing to see that. Letha Scanzoni, you know, willing to put her life out there on the line.

Doris M. She did, didn't she?

Virginia M. She surely did. She surely did. And willingly, and joyously. She's writing a book on gay marriage now. You know what it's going to be called? Harper & Row's going to bring it out. She and a guy who teaches at Hope College, which is a Reformed Church of America college. It's going to be called—let's see if I can get this right—What God Hath Joined Together. Subtitled, A Christian Case for Gay Marriage. He's very nervous about that title. He wants to back out of that title. I said, "Well let me tell you what a gay person feels. What God hath joined together, you just get a rush of gratitude that anybody is willing to say, 'Oh, God has joined these gay people together.' So it's going to be a very good title for sales in the gay community. And the people who hate the idea of gay marriage aren't going to buy it anyway. So." (laughs)

Doris M. They're going to buy it so they can figure out what size shotguns to buy. (laughter)

Virginia M. She's just a delightful person, and she has suffered so much for her heterosexuality. And she admits it. She would love to be able to be [otherwise]—and my college roommate, Bev, that I met at Bob Jones, she would have loved to have been able to respond to my love for her. She just couldn't. You know? Who knows why? She still says she never loved another human being the way she loves me. And she cries when she says it. And she had two men, neither of whom were great shakes. Husbands. She just—but she, you know, you can't if you can't. And I certainly understand that.

Doris M. And I think understanding that makes it easier to, I mean, to imagine a straight person being able to understand why we just can't.

Virginia M. Yeah. Right. Right.

Doris M. We just aren't.

Virginia M. Yeah. It's just not possible for you. It's not a spigot you turn on or off. That's not how it is. And we've talked about it. I said, "Were you perhaps by your Baptist upbringing traumatized to the point where you couldn't accept a bisexual tendency in you?" Because there was, you know, I mean she does love me more than any other human being. What was that? But just sexually, she just absolutely cannot respond except to a man. That's a shame. She says it's a shame. (laughter) A lot of straight women say that. I've heard—I used to sit in the faculty lounge and just listen to the secretaries over there on the other side of the lounge talking over their lunches. And many times they would say, "Oh, God, I wish I could just live with my girlfriends, you know. He's such a pain!" (laughs)

Doris M. Well I know we were, we started off before I asked that question about talking more about Wiccans.

Virginia M. Yeah.

Doris M. And where they fit in.

Virginia M. Yeah, well that's—where they fit in.

Doris M. Or I guess I'm just trying to introduce the topic.

Virginia M. I think it's a great religion. When I went to the Starhawk weekend at Kirkridge, granted, she only had one weekend, so how much can you do in one weekend? The guided meditations and the use of drumming to try to put yourself into a trance and so on is not my cup of tea, exactly. Partly because of my patriarchal

education, I'll admit. I was trained so in linear thinking that I prefer a good linear lecture that I can follow this point and that point and the other point. But there was something about the spirit of it all. She just sent us out to talk to trees. Well, I would have liked a little training in how to talk to trees before I'm sent out to talk to them. So I probably didn't get as much out of it as I should have. But her spirit was wonderful. And the acceptance of every kind of diversity. I mean, anything that teaches that has got to be good. It's loving. And the training that whatever you put out there is going to come back to you, what is it? Six fold? That's pretty good training. Somebody I love said something very similar, you know, about judging not that you be not judged. (laughter) Lots of stuff like that. And whatever you do to the other comes home to you. This is of course, what the *Course* teaches, too. So I very much loved [Starhawk], and I asked her how her partnership stands all the travel. That would be very hard for me. She's all over the world, you know, working. She was over in Israel and everything, working for peace. She said, "Well, actually, it keeps the sex always alive," she says [that] with this little smirk. (laughs) But Cara is my other closest Wicca friend. Cara is the former partner of Suzannah. And I go to Carolyn McDade's weekends at Kirkridge. We sing. So that's Wicca, basically. It's all about nature. We sing about the sun coming up and going around the world and we're trying to heal the world while we're at it. And, hey! Healing the world, that's wonderful with me. And if it takes a nature-based [religion]—heaven knows, we need ecological change—so I guess a lot of those women are Wiccan, come to think of it. And try to pin that lady down! Carolyn McDade, she ain't going to tell you who she is. She's everybody. She's everybody.

Doris M. Well actually that was going to be where I was going with this question. It seems that you know quite a bit about the organizations and the conference circuits and things that would be part of organized religion. But how much interaction do you

think there is between organized Wicca, which is there kind of in the background—

Virginia M. Yeah, you can't even find it. You have to know somebody. And like there's this little shop down in Butler, New Jersey. And we tried to ask, where is this Wiccan group? They're not going to tell you. It doesn't matter how many credentials you try to present. They're not going to tell you.

Doris M. Right. Or how sincere you are.

Virginia M. Yeah.

Doris M. So would you say that there's much interaction between—

Virginia M. No.

Doris M. --evangelicals or organized religions, whether they're mainstream or not?

Virginia M. Well, I'm one very queer evangelical, you have to remember that. And the whole Evangelical Women's Caucus is really the evangelical left. The evangelical *far left*.

Doris M. Right. (laughs)

Virginia M. So just understand that. And there's absolutely no connection between [Wicca and] the center and right wing evangelicals. Because they would say that it's demonic. But the evangelical left, they're feminists and they understand better.

Doris M. They would have connection. They would read the book—

Virginia M. They would be perfectly willing to have, yeah. They had Carolyn McDade do a--

Doris M. That's what I was wondering.

Virginia M. -- a large part of the last conference. And we got up and sang her music on Saturday night, and people said it was like angels singing. You know? Everybody who was in her path. And I'll sing with Carolyn McDade anytime. I had a chance to go to various Bible studies with people I respect and love. But my chance to sing with Carolyn McDade is sacred to me. I go every year and just unload all my burdens and just be there. And we have a little bet on how many songs in it's going to be before I start to cry. (laughter) I cry and cry there. It's such a wonderful release, you know?

Doris M. Me, too.

Virginia M. You've sung with her?

Doris M. I cry a lot. Whether or not it's Carolyn McDade. But just put me in front of music and I open right up.

Virginia M. Oh, the beauty is tremendous. "Blessed are our lives, and blessed our loves."

Doris M. If we were going to bring this around and wrap it up, is there anything that you would want to use? Anything that still feels like it's out there that you need to include?

Virginia M. No. I'm very grateful for all the help I've gotten through the years from people and organizations, and some of the recognition that's come my way. I'm very

grateful to see the movement toward ecumenism, at any rate. And if it isn't as far as I'd like to see it go, I feel wonderful that I've lived long enough to see the changes that I've seen. Because I grew up not knowing where any gay community was. And now I know the WOW community, and I know the community at Kirkridge, and I know the Evangelical [and Ecumenical Women's Caucus]. I said to a straight woman at the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women's Caucus, "You know, I'm half in love with all of you." And she laughed, and she said, "And we're all half in love with you." And that's a wonderful thing to feel! God, that's a wonderful thing to feel. And that I come from a place where it was the love that dared not speak its name, to a place where we're debating gay marriage in public places. And so my feeling—I worry a little about the young people—that they think coming out is such a lark. And some of them have even thought that gayness is chic in the high schools and such. And I sometimes worry that the likes of George Bush could really do to this country what they would like to do to this country, which is turn it into a theocracy. And God would have nothing to do with it. But their ideas of God would have a lot to do with it. And if that happened, then a lot of these people who have stuck their necks out without knowing anything, without counting any price because they don't think there is a price, and they don't know anything about the fights we've fought to get them—women in seminary who just buy right into the male language and everything. No awareness that this is what enslaved us to start with. That worries me. The lack of awareness of history scares me. Now these kids are coming out—and that's great, and I love to see them so happy and all that—but if George Bush or his like got their way, there would be a big price to pay for being out there. And they're out there without having ever thought about it, about what price could happen. So I don't want to see it come true that those who don't know history are condemned to repeat it. I just don't want to see that happen. And the same thing with feminism. You know, a lot of the young people say, "Oh, well, you know, I'm not a feminist, but—" Well, you know, a lot of us fought to get them even the chance to

be heard at all. And I would wish that they would at least know that a big price was paid and not let it slide back again. It kind of frightened me to read Faderman's historical insights. It helped me in many way to understand people. Like Julia, Suzannah's mother, who was demented, so she would forget my name, and she would ask it. I'd say, "Virginia." And she'd say, "Oh, my dearest friend in high school was named Virginia." And I think she was telling me more than just, you know? (Pause) But to realize that [when she was young] what was it, like 40 percent of girls would admit that they had had very close relations with women when they were in college and then all of a sudden, after a decade of that [homophobic] blistering, then all of a sudden, nobody had had. Well, come on. Of course they had. But they learned not to say they had. And that's scary. That worries me. I would like to believe, you know—it worries the surface of my mind. It doesn't worry the deep self. It will be a divine comedy. But I would like us not to throw away what gains we've made. And so I really respect the archivists and historians, and what they're trying to do.

Doris M. Well that's a wonderful note for us to end on. (laughter)

Virginia M. Okay.

Doris M. Thank you so much, Virginia. It's been an absolute pleasure spending these hours with you. And I do believe that putting these things in words is something that can waken that sense of consciousness. And I know you used that expression at one time, "to see the light come on in people's eyes." To know that there's something valuable and deeper than, you know, all the sort of instructions we see in our daily life. But something that's inside and true and it comes to. So thank you.

Virginia M. Yes. Thank you.

Doris M. You're welcome.

(200 minutes)

(End of Interview.)

*The transcript was reviewed against the tape by Doris Malkmus. Obviously misspoken and repeated words were deleted or corrected. Virginia Mollenkott reviewed and edited the transcript. Her additions are enclosed in square brackets. Minor portions of the tape and transcript have been deleted to protect privacy.