

**U.18 Long Civil Rights Movement:
Heirs to a Fighting Tradition**

**Interview U-0574
Tema Okun
September 14, 2007**

**Field Notes – 2
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FIELD NOTES- Tema Okun

Interviewee: Tema Okun

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview date: September 14, 2007 (Interview 3 of 4)

Location: Tema's home, Durham, North Carolina

HEIRS OF A FIGHTING TRADITION: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists” is a multi-phased oral history project which explores the stories and traditions of social justice activism in North Carolina through in-depth interviews with fourteen highly respected activists and organizers. Selected for the integrity and high level of skill in their work dedicated to social justice, the interviewees represent a diversity of age, gender, and ethnicity. These narratives capture the richness of a set of activists with powerful perspectives on social justice and similar visions of the common good. These are stories of transition and transformation, tales of sea change and burnout, organizing successes and heart wrenching defeats. These are the stories of the Movement.

All of the oral histories will be archived in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and will be a valuable addition to the modest amount of literature about contemporary social justice activism in the South. This is a project of the North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition.

THE INTERVIEWEE: Tema Okun is a white, Jewish woman who was born in New York City, NY on March 15, 1952. Okun has been active in Middle East peace efforts as a member of Jews for a Just Peace and as a volunteer with the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions-USA. Okun has worked with social justice organizations for over 30 years. She has worked as a development director, production coordinator, training director, interim director, trainer and facilitator. Much of her work has focused on anti-racism training. She has been an adjunct professor at Duke University, Guilford College, UNC-Chapel Hill’s School of Social Work and at UNC-G. Okun is working toward a Ph.D. in the Department of Education Curriculum and Cultural Foundations at the University of North Carolina—Greensboro. As of 2007, Okun lives with her partner, Tom Stern, in Durham, North Carolina.

THE INTERVIEWER: Bridgette Burge graduated from Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee in 1995 with a degree in Anthropology/Sociology and a semester of intensive study of oral history theory and methodology. In 1995 and 1996, Burge and a colleague conducted fieldwork in Honduras, Central America collecting the oral histories of six Honduran women. She earned her master’s degree in Anthropology from the University of Memphis in 1998. In 1999, she moved to North Carolina and served as North Carolina Peace Action’s state coordinator, and later as North Carolina Peace Action Education Fund’s executive director. In 2005, Burge began her own consulting company to provide training,

facilitation and planning to social change organizations. The same year, with the support of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Burge launched the project “Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists.” The interviews from this project are archived at the Southern Historical Collection in the Wilson Library at UNC-Chapel Hill.

DESCRIPTION OF INTERVIEW: September 14, 2007, Recorded again at Tema’s house at her kitchen table. Before we started, she let me have a mentoring session with her. I asked her advice about what tools to use in an upcoming potluck dinner with white anti-war activists who’ve had little or no experience analyzing white supremacy/privilege/racism and how it’s related to fractures in the movement in NC with people of color-led justice and anti-war groups. She suggested Kivel’s book “Uprooting Racism” for some short exercises we could do together that evening.

The weather was overcast and it was drizzling. She kept her cell phone on in case her ailing father called. She also insisted I eat a quick, healthy lunch that she’d whipped together from leftover grains and vegetables in her fridge (part of her Rosh Hashanah resolution to live more simply) before I left. She insisted that I should since it was free, and I’d just mentioned the fact that my husband and I have \$.58 in our savings account.

We started the interview by talking about her recent trip to Palestine. There are only a few questions left on my interview guideline, but they are deep questions and I didn’t want us to rush them, so we’ll have one more interview.

TRANSCRIPT—TEMA OKUN

Interviewee: Tema Okun

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview date: September 14, 2007 (Interview 3 of 4)

Location: Durham, North Carolina

Length: 1 disc; approximately 1 hours and 34 minutes

START OF INTERVIEW

Bridgette Burge: Today is September fourteenth, 2007. This is an interview with Tema Okun with Bridgette Burger as the interviewer. This is part of the *Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists* project. This is the third interview with Tema in this series. The first interview was on May sixteenth, 2007, the second on June twenty-second, 2007, and now we're here today, same place at Tema's place in Durham, North Carolina on Rigsby Avenue.

[break in conversation to turn off cell phones]

BB: Okay, can we start by telling me about how your trip was, your most recent trip with you and Tom to the West Bank?

Tema Okun: Sure. It was very bittersweet, I think. Unlike the other times, we stayed with a family in the West Bank in Ramallah for three weeks and their daughter was getting married, so the whole trip culminated with this incredible wedding, which I think is probably the best wedding either of us has ever been to. We spent the first week and a half visiting the houses that ICAHD USA and ICAHD are rebuilding, the Palestinian homes are being rebuilt, and meeting with the families and talking to them about their situation. And so we would go

and meet with these families that had these incredibly heartbreaking stories about what was happening to them and their houses. In every case, the house represents their life savings and the Israeli government demolishing the house means that their life savings is gone and their sense of security is gone forever. I think one of the ironies for me about the whole thing is that how all of this, well—most people don't know about the house demolitions—but the building of the wall is all about insuring safety and security for Israelis while the Israeli government is making life for Palestinians completely insecure and just sort of the incredible irony of that. So there was this witnessing of this policy of house demolitions and the effect it has on families. In every case, it's an erasure of families' life savings and in almost every case, somebody in the family ends up, usually the wife or mother, going to the hospital because the trauma is so incredibly bad.

BB: What do you mean going to the hospital?

TO: Well, they have to witness their house being destroyed and their belongings being put out on the street and not knowing where they're going to stay and their life savings being destroyed and their life being destroyed and their reaction to that is to go into such incredible trauma, physical and emotional, that they lose their minds and so they go to the hospital. They don't end up staying there usually for a long time, that's not where they spend the rest of their lives, but it's the impact of the demolition will send them to the hospital. I hadn't realized that before. I hadn't realized either the thing about the life savings or about the—I had obviously understood it was traumatic, but I didn't understand the specific piece of this hospital-- . I mean, it was just that we would go and visit with five or six families in a day and every family would say, "Oh yes, and our mother had to go to the hospital," and the

next family: “Oh yes, our mother had to go to the hospital,” and “Oh yes, our mother had to go to the hospital.”

BB: Where is the hospital?

TO: It depends on where the demolitions are happening, but the local hospital.

BB: How's health care for folks?

TO: Oh, it's terrible there. There is no health care and you know the stories of the people. When we were there, somebody died because the Israeli soldiers wouldn't let them get through the checkpoint to the hospital and it doesn't mean a checkpoint from the West Bank to Israel; it means a checkpoint from one Palestinian town to another. So we go through all of that and then we stay in this home with this family. It's a family that's in better shape than many because both of the parents work and so there's income. If you don't have to engage in any way with the outside world, if you don't have to travel somewhere or go to work or go shopping or if you can just stay in the house and be with the family, it's incredibly sweet. Our being there was a big event for the family and so they spent a lot of time making sure we met all their relatives. It's a very familial culture and we spent a lot of time visiting and laughing and food being made for us.

It's an incredibly generous culture and what I wanted, what I would wish for is that I could take people with me, both to meet with the families whose houses were demolished and meet with the family that we stayed with because it's the only way that I can think of to help people understand that people just want to live their lives. This is not about Hamas. It's not about Fatah. Those words never came up. It's about in Hebron, the farmers who've been farming fields literally for over a thousand years wanting to be left alone to farm the fields and not being able to, or the family that we were living with wanting to be able to live

someplace where they could have access to their daughter. They used to live in Bethenena, which is on the Israeli side of the wall, and they moved to the West Bank side of the wall because their daughter is marrying somebody who doesn't have a Jerusalem identity card and so he could never come to visit them legally if he wanted to and it's a very familial culture. The idea of not being able to see your son-in-law on a regular basis is unthinkable.

So they moved to the West Bank side, meaning that quite possibly if Israel changes the policy, which I would not be surprised, so that anybody living on the West Bank side of the wall, their Jerusalem ID card gets revoked, then they will lose their ability to move; so they moved there. The whole thing is just--. And so now their movement, their whole life is affected by the fact that they've moved onto the West Bank side of the wall. It's just draconian. There's still, parts of Jerusalem are on the West Bank side of the wall and Palestinians can't build in Jerusalem on the West Bank side of the wall. But if she doesn't continue to live in Jerusalem, then she will lose her Jerusalem ID card. So if she wants to live with her husband, she either has to choose between living illegally in Jerusalem because all the housing is full and you can't build new housing, or living in Ramallah proper, which she can do, but then she loses her Jerusalem ID. It's just insane.

So the experience was quite bittersweet. It was really wonderful at times and we would go to Nablus and so you'd have this intense trip going to Nablus, which is in any real world maybe a thirty, forty-five minute drive. We had to negotiate three checkpoints. No car is allowed to go from outside Nablus into Nablus. So at the third checkpoint, you have to leave your car, walk through the checkpoint, get a taxi on the other side. But once you're in Nablus, if you can put occupation out of your mind, it's an incredibly fabulous place. We went to visit our host wife's brother. Anyway, a relative of the family gave us a tour through

the market and it was just so clear to me that if there wasn't occupation and if Palestine was allowed to be its own state that anybody, you, anybody would love to go there for vacation. It's just very compelling. The architecture is beautiful. The market is vibrant. We stopped and bought some—I'm going to forget the name. It's a cheese dessert, what's it called, that Nablus is famous for. We went and visited some soap factories that were destroyed during the incursions in 2005 and are trying to rehabilitate themselves.

It's just it's insane. What's happening with this occupation is just totally insane. It doesn't accomplish anything except to make people hate Israel more. So it was bittersweet. So we'd have this experience of being in Nablus and really loving being there and having to negotiate checkpoints. It's hard to explain. It's just there's no way to explain it. It's like living in two realities at once and living in two realities as Westerners who could leave.

BB: What's the name of the family you stayed with?

TO: I don't know if I want to say because I don't know, it's unclear to me what happens if the--. Like when we did all the reports about the families whose houses were rebuilt, we didn't use their names because it's just unclear how much stuff is being tracked.

BB: Did you have a translator?

TO: No, it was great. The family mostly speaks English that we stayed with or they speak much better English than they think they do and certainly a thousand times better than we speak Arabic; we learned about five phrases. Everybody speaks a little bit of English, it's just amazing, because you have to. I was very anxious about spending three weeks with a family because I'm someone who needs a lot of private time, but what I found was that the language provided both the communication and the space that I needed and the family is just, it was wonderful; I loved every minute of it. And we would sit and they would speak Arabic

for awhile and then they'd start to speak English to include us or to tell us what they were talking about and we'd speak English for awhile and then they'd go back to Arabic.

It was a very natural sort of flow and I was perfectly for them to talk without me, involving me, because it gave me some mental space and then when they were ready to involve me or if I wanted to be involved, I'd say something, or if I recognized a word or I realized they were talking about something I might want to join in. It was such an easy ebb and flow both with them and then all the extended friends and family. We went to Jaffa Beach, to the Arab beach one day with some of their closest friends and we just had a great time. Most of the time they spent speaking Arabic, but it was fine and they were laughing and then we would laugh and then they'd explain what they were laughing about and then we'd make a joke. It was just very easy.

When we went to meet with the families, yes, there would be translation. The contractor, somebody would translate if they didn't speak English.

BB: The contractor?

TO: The houses that are being rebuilt now are being rebuilt by Palestinian contractors. We're building a lot at one time as opposed to the one house that we build every summer with volunteer help. These are just being built.

BB: This is the result of a significant contribution you mentioned last time?

TO: Yes, right.

BB: That's great. Have y'all experienced any resistance to that or is it on the radar?

TO: We're not sure, we're not sure if it's on the radar or not. The way it works is that the Israeli government had a budget every year for house demolitions and so they only demolish so many houses. I mean, it's enough, it's three hundred a year, about three hundred

a year, because that's all the budget allows for. So in the case of the base camp, they deliberately destroyed the same house over and over and over again as it got rebuilt. In general, we have not seen a pattern of the demolition of houses that get rebuilt in any kind of significant way.

BB: Where's the base camp?

TO: It's in Anata.

BB: And that's the base camp for—

TO: For ICAHD. They have a summer camp where internationals come and rebuild a Palestinian home and this summer, they rebuilt two because as they were rebuilding one, the government came and demolished one right in front. It was probably the best documented house demolition ever. If you go to our website, you can see it because lots of pictures and film was taken and so they rebuilt both the house they were working on and the house of the family who was--, the second house too.

BB: What's ICAHD's relationship with the Israeli government?

TO: ICAHD, it's like an NGO and so I think they're on the radar screen just like NGO's are here.

BB: But no direct—well, I guess, how direct--?

TO: It's hard to know. I mean, it's hard to know. I think the board of ICAHD fears that the Israeli government might shut them down because of this, but that hasn't happened yet.

BB: Anything else about your trip or about--?

TO: No, I think we're trying to figure out what we're going to now that ICAHD USA is trying to get some local campaigns started where people commit to rebuilding a house

because we need more money than even the donors have given us. And I think the other thing that really struck me when we were there is that the houses that are rebuilt are literally, are sort of physical manifestations of resisting occupation because almost in every place except one the rebuilding of the house prevented settlement expansion or expansion in East Jerusalem of commercial takeover by the Israeli government. So in Hebron for example, the houses that were demolished were literally in the side of the mountain where the settlement is on top of the mountain and the settlers throw rocks and stones down onto the families and so by rebuilding their houses, we make it hard. The settlement just wants to expand, the settlers don't want them there, and so by rebuilding, we literally keep them from doing that. I've come back sort of even more committed to the idea of rebuilding houses because I think it's so—I mean, it not only helps people continue to have a place to live, but also, even if nobody knew about it and many people don't, is very specific resistance to settlement expansion.

BB: What's next for you in your role in the work?

TO: Well, I think just trying to figure out how to jumpstart some local campaigns to commit to rebuilding a house.

BB: So you'll take part in that personally?

TO: Yeah, yeah.

BB: Fundraising, is that a part of it too?

TO: Yeah. I coordinate the indirect fundraising, all the mail fundraising. That's been my job from the beginning; so I do that.

BB: So switching totally, someone told me that you and Tom used to have this great house, speaking of housing, in Durham. Can you tell me more about what was involved in y'all's decision to move out of that house into this space?

TO: Well, I'd like to say it had to do with the community space, but that would be lying. (laughs) We spent a year in San Francisco and I found—
[break in conversation]

TO: I found that I think I'm at heart a city person and so I just living there and I loved living in a smaller space and we walked everywhere and I just loved everything about it. But I'm committed to this area and my family's here and so when we came back and understood that there was this attempt to revitalize downtown, we thought, "Well, we'll downsize and we'll move downtown and pretend we're living in San Francisco." (laughs) Our friend, Ellen, who's an artist and also spent a lot of time in Palestine, she and the two of us were going to figure out a living situation where we'd each have our own house, but have some shared space.

BB: I think we did talk about this.

TO: Yeah.

BB: And it's recorded, that's right. So there was nothing else. That's really the whole thinking behind it.

TO: Right, that's the whole story, yes.

BB: Okay, good. Just going back to your teaching career a little bit, I guess in 2003, you were an adjunct professor at Duke University's Heart Leadership program at the Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy. What does Heart stand for, do you know? Is that a person or an acronym?

TO: It might be a person, I think. I have no idea actually.

BB: You taught a course on leadership and change. Did you make that up or how is it that you--?

TO: No, Julie, then Thomasson, now Mooney and David Dodson from MDC [established in 1967 by the North Carolina Fund, with the support of the state's civic and business leadership and the Ford Foundation, to help the state transition from a segregated, agricultural work force to an integrated, industrial work force] were teaching. I think they had been invited by them to come and teach a class on change strategies and David couldn't do it anymore; he was too busy. So Julie was looking for somebody else to help her co-teach and asked me.

BB: What was Julie's maiden name?

TO: Thomasson.

BB: Thomasson, okay. And MDC, will you say a little bit about what that is?

TO: Oof, it's been a long time. It's a long time. It's been around a long time, started by George Esser, I think, to—you'll have to go to the website.

BB: Okay, I'll look it up. But generally, I hear them spoken well of in—

TO: Yeah, community development.

BB: Community development and financial support and all sorts of different programs their tentacles have touched. Was the curriculum already developed or did you—

TO: Pretty much, yeah, it was.

BB: What was it?

TO: We tried to do an overview of the different ways, different strategies that historically and now people have used to create change. So we looked at organizing and advocacy and service with a change approach and education and community development. We did a lot of bringing in guest speakers, people who'd been very involved in different change efforts. We had Bill Bell and we had some great classes where like Bill Bell and

somebody else came and talked about the merging of the school systems in Durham and we had some people from rural North Carolina who'd been active in a community development effort come and talk about that, had Cynthia Brown [grassroots activist, founder of Sojourner Inc, ran for US Senate in 2004; one of the Heirs interviewed for this collection] come and talk about the Southpoint fight. It was a lot of talking theoretically about strategies and then giving people exposure to folks who'd been involved on the ground in those strategies.

BB: Do you have a theory of change? If someone says, "In twenty seconds or less, tell me how would you talk about your thinking at this point in your life on how change happens?"

TO: There's a question.

BB: If you were interviewing me and asked me that, I'd be so pissed. Can I get back to you with an essay?

TO: Well, it's interesting because my background is we used to do workshops on how community organizing was the only way to create change. We had very strong feelings at that time, I remember, how service was terrible and education was terrible and advocacy was terrible. Every change effort had to involve the people who were most affected and I actually think I believe that. I don't believe in this hierarchy of strategies, but I think every strategy offers something and I think my strategy of change, one thing I would say is that I don't have a hierarchy anymore. I try not to have a hierarchy about anything except values really, but that changes happens in any infinite combination of ways and the kind of change that is required now, I don't think there's any way to know exactly how it's going to happen or even if it's going to happen. I would say the bottom line is that the people who are most affected need to be involved and the thing is that we are all the most affected. So part of the challenge

is how to help people how deeply affected they are by the way the world works right now, how inhumane it is and how devastating it is to people's souls and to the environment.

BB: How do you go about helping people understand that?

TO: Well, it's interesting because the other thing I believe and I haven't figured out how to do is that I'm not motivated by how bad things are; I'm motivated by possibility. However, having said that, I am much more knowledgeable about how bad things are (laughs) than I am about possibilities. So I have a little bit of a conundrum here. I can tell you what's wrong with things and in fact, I think it's my life practice to try and notice what's right with things. I'm sure we've talked about this before, but I grew up in a "there is no glass" kind of mindset. So trying to even see the glass and that's there's even water in it is quite a challenge for me.

So what I do, what I've told myself I'm doing right now is because most of the students that I teach come with very little and often without any critical thinking skills, without any understanding that they are conditioned by the larger culture, so I feel like my job is to help them at least see that. Two classes ago, I showed them a film about My Lai, which they knew nothing about and to their credit, half of them were very angry that they didn't know anything about it. And then the next class, I showed them one about affluenza and consumption. I have this image of Erika in my class sort of clutching her head going like, "I've got a migraine. Let me out of here." And we were laughing about it and I was saying, "I don't wake up in the morning trying to figure out how I'm going to make you feel bad today." But it's clear that I'm giving them things to think about and it's making their brains hurt and I'm trying to figure out how to balance that with enough sense of possibility or fun that they don't dread coming to class. So I try to use a lot of humor, try to give them all a

chance to talk about their own life experience, but it's a challenge and I haven't figured it out. The next thing on my agenda really is to try and pull together a group of people who do teaching and so we have some kind of collaborative thinking about how to handle some of these issues because I haven't figured it out.

BB: Then more about the theory of change?

TO: Oh, so I think involving people who are most affected and I think it requires helping people understand how they can get information they don't have because I think you can't envision a possibility if you don't even know it exists and helping people have the courage to envision what they really want and believe that they can get it, something I haven't even really done for myself. I really feel like my task as a teacher now and as a human being is to learn how to live gracefully in the fact of not having. I would say that my theory of change has to help with helping us all understand that we don't know, we can't know, won't know, and how can we live in the tension of all the contradictions that we are called upon to live in. So that's all. I don't have a grand theory of change, just that we have to.

BB: Around the same time you were teaching at the leadership program there, you were also adjunct faculty at Guilford College in Greensboro in the Justice and Policy Studies department, which is interesting. I guess Guilford's traditionally Quaker-founded, so it's not too odd that at a school like that, it would have a Justice and Policy Studies department. We've talked about this some, but I just wanted to go back a little bit. Some of the courses you taught were Organization Communication; Understanding Oppression Systems; Ethics, Justice, and Public Policy; and Trust and Violence—what is that? Do you remember what that's about? You stuck your tongue out and shook your head. (laughs)

TO: Well, I don't know if I want to admit this on tape, but lots of times I'll be given a course and at Guilford this was the case where they'd say, "Here, teach this" and I would never get a syllabus and so I would have to sort of make it up out of whole cloth and I learn as I go along, which I don't think there's anything wrong with that. But the Trust and Violence class was really challenging. So I can't really tell you. I tried to make it about thinking about, on a cultural level, on an institutional level, on a personal level, how the issues of trust and violence get played out historically and now and then how do we live in those issues. So we talked a lot about race, class, and gender and what it means to have lack of cultural trust and what it means to have lack of institutional trust and how do you build institutional, cultural trust. And it was interesting because one of the small groups literally came to blows.

BB: That's memorable.

TO: We had a very specific case of how there was no trust and so there was violence and how lack of trust can lead to violence, particularly in a culture where violence is seen as the way that you handle your inability to trust somebody.

BB: What was it about?

TO: It was about power and different styles in the small group and an inability to hear each other and see each other as full human beings.

BB: Did it happen in the classroom?

TO: It happened in the hall.

BB: Were you there?

TO: No, I heard it and then I went out and made them stop and I literally had to yell "stop" because they were trying to hit each other and then I facilitated a discussion and then I

made them all sit in separate corners and then I made them write about it and reflect on it and I don't think I was very successful at helping the two folks who were most involved come to any kind of understanding of why they responded that way. I have a lot more work to do about understanding how to help people see their own stuff in a classroom setting, so another reason for the collaborative group.

BB: How do you generally find yourself responding to when you witness violence? What does it make you feel and what are some initial responses that you notice in yourself?

TO: I think it just makes me feel powerless. In that situation I was the teacher, so I had power and I used my power instinctively just to yell "stop" and make them stop, which I think is probably an appropriate use of my power because the violence was not--. I'm completely committed to nonviolence because I'm completely committed to the idea, if you go back to theory of change, that you have to act the way you say you want to be and I don't want a world of violence so I don't want to act violently. I can think of a few times in my life when I've had a violent impulse, but I don't generally have a violent—when I get frustrated, I don't get violent. I understand the violent impulse though, or some of them, not all of them, and I understand the violent impulse when we feel impotent and powerless and want to strike out; I completely understand that. So what was the question? How do I respond? I just don't, I don't, so that's how I respond.

BB: Do you use the label "pacifist" to describe yourself?

TO: I don't think so. I don't think I have ever said I'm a pacifist. I just say I don't believe in violence, but I've never really thought about it. I don't really know what a pacifist is.

BB: When you said, “I’m a completely nonviolent person,” is that a decision that you came to, like more of a description of your tendency and nature and your decision of like what you said, “We have to walk the talk?” But does it extend theoretically to how you’d respond in moments where self-defense--?

TO: I have no way of knowing. I would like to say yes, but I have no way of knowing and until I’m in that situation, the thing about the Mai Lai film, which I think everybody should watch, is that you have these soldiers, very young soldiers who are in the situation of conflict in Vietnam, felt under siege, were dropped in this village and told that the village was the enemy and that they would be shot at. They weren’t shot at, but they then proceeded to shoot and kill almost all the villagers, raping and cutting at them too. You have this one young man throughout the film who’s clearly totally traumatized as a result of having done this and he describes in graphic detail what he did and his impulse to do it. I just think it’s impossible to—and he’s not a young man that, I’m sure he didn’t perceive himself to be somebody that, he says that: “I’m not somebody who was brought up to kill people,” and he wasn’t. My mother was a pacifist, so I guess I do know what it means, and my brother was able to get conscientious objection status during the Vietnam War because he was not allowed to play with guns when we were raised, but I don’t think I wanted to so it wasn’t really an issue. So I think yes, I have a philosophical belief that violence is not an answer to anything and that a political answer, social answer, anything--. I understand the violent impulse. I don’t know what I would do if I was put in a situation where violence was called for. So I can’t tell you that I don’t have a violent streak.

BB: And for communities under siege, do you still feel like violence isn’t an answer?

TO: Yes.

BB: Politically and socially?

TO: Yes.

BB: What are a couple of the most memorable classes or dynamics in a class that you taught? What stands out and why?

TO: Well, what stands out is what's most recent so the class I'm teaching now, a couple things. After the My Lai movie, one of the young men in my class said that his uncle was in My Lai and committed suicide within months after coming back so that was definitely a memorable moment. I had them watch the movie and then we waited a week and then I had them go around and talk about their responses to the movie. I'm just always incredibly moved by people in my class and the things that they say and particularly when they're exposed to something that is new for them or that moves them in their hearts and they speak about that. Then there was one young women. So people were going around and they were talking about being disgusted or angry. A lot of my students have family members in the military. They talked about how it gave them pause and that they were concerned about their family members in the military or they were concerned about people in Iraq and what they were having to go through and it was raising questions for them about the Army.

And then we got to one young woman who said it made her angry and I didn't pursue it because when I do a go-around, it's an offering for people to say what they're feeling and I'm not going to come back at them without any. I just want to hear where people are. She said she was angry and I did say, "Well, what are you angry about?" And she said, "I feel like they're attacking me and my family. My family's all military and they're attacking me and maybe if they hadn't done this in this village, then the US would have been overrun by communism and we would be communists and so I'm just angry."

So something that's on my mind is that. It's like I have no idea how to respond to that and certainly not in the moment. I've had ideas since then and it's going to be hard because I don't want to single her out and she was a lone response; everybody else had a very--. So there's that response and again it's not that I'm not sympathetic to her. I'm very appreciative that she gave an honest response. Particularly given what everybody else was saying, I think it takes a lot of courage to say what you really think in that situation. So that's not it. It's more how I want to know is she angry that the massacre happened? Is she angry that the story about the massacre is being told? Is she angry that people are critical of the military or these people for massacring people? I'm really intrigued by that. It reminds me of people who are angry when they're called racists, that they're angry at being called something, not at the racism. So it's kind of interesting. I want to know more about that and then I want to know what it is that makes it possible--.

And before she spoke, another young man gave a brilliant to me little thing about how it made him angry because it reminded him of terrorism because in the movie, Lieutenant Callie says that "I was told that communism was the enemy and this was a village of communists so they were the enemy." I'm not paraphrasing exactly, but he was basically equating communism with the enemy and he was doing his job and that it was hard to tell who was the enemy because everybody looked alike and communism was the enemy and he was doing his job.

So another young man said it's the same thing with terrorism and that terrorism becomes this word that symbolizes the enemy and so I can look at you and if you're a terrorist, then you're the enemy and he was doing a sort of very brilliant analysis about how this word comes to represent this thing that we're fearful of and we don't understand the

thing itself. And so I was interested in that and as a teacher how do I unpack that for people and sort of get them to look at so it's okay to massacre a village because we're afraid of communism and do you even know what communism is? If we unpack what communism is, are you still afraid of it and does it still warrant a massacring of people who have no guns? So you're willing to sacrifice people in the name of terrorism and to unpack it. That's where my weakness as a teacher is, is that I am so clear in my own veins about the necessity to see people as full people and that I'm not able, I think, to understand when people think that communism is such a threat or terrorism is such a threat that a village can be sacrificed. I don't understand it and so it's hard for me to help people think about that because I have such a visceral response to like, I don't get that.

BB: Yeah, anthropology helped me again a lot in those ways and some social psychology about how human beings construct meaning and knowledge through narrative and how narrative shapes literally at a physical level how we see and think about the world and so the colonizer's tool of dehumanization and of course the propaganda and the media so that people become an idea and they're not humans and how deliberate and important that is, not just for some calculated people sitting in a room to do that, but for them to convince themselves that that's truth so that they can convince others.

TO: My problem is that I think that if I was to ask the student, "So would you be willing for your family and your village to be massacred in order to keep communism from coming to this country," she would say yes. So that's the other part of it that's hard for me. I had another student who said she is willing for everybody and everything to be videotaped so that she's safe and secure and I've tried some different arguments with her. I said, "Don't you think you take that position because you're not able to imagine yourself doing anything

that the government would consider bad?" Because she said, "I don't have anything to worry about." And: "What if you had an Arabic-sounding name? Or what if you were going to the library to look up materials about being gay and your parents didn't like that?" She couldn't--

BB: "But I don't do any of those."

TO: Yeah, she couldn't imagine that. And I had another student who said that global warming is not a problem because the earth will survive no matter what and I tried to say, "Well, isn't that an easier position for you to take because wouldn't it be harder for you to take that position if you were one of the folks who was most directly affected by global warming?" And he took the position that everybody could move, anybody could move. So trying to negotiate my responsibilities in these situations to respect people and challenge their thinking, I'm still learning so much about that.

BB: It sounds like a sticking point is when people can't imagine themselves in that situation. Maybe that's a good place for the blue-eyed, brown-eyed experience where you wear a dot and for three weeks they get to see because they have blue eyes and they don't get to talk or they get told their idea is dumb, like a real, visceral, arbitrary assignment. For a lot of people, especially ones with the most privilege, they've never been in a situation like that. I've done it a couple of times, but yeah, I don't know.

TO: See I tend to stay away from exercises like that because I feel like I'm not equipped to handle the emotional stuff that comes along with it. I'm trying to figure out other--. I do the crossover and stuff like that, but the real deep stuff like that I'm afraid of.

BB: Maybe a co-taught?

TO: Yeah, that probably there, yeah, right.

BB: Interesting, deep stuff.

TO: Yeah, it is. That's why I love teaching though because it really pushes me to think a lot about myself and other people.

BB: It's so funny to me that as much as you hated school for so many years, that now you're working on your Ph.D. It just cracks me up.

TO: Well, if I could teach without having to have a Ph.D., I wouldn't be in school. Although I should say that this is probably my best school experience ever and like I'm taking a class now in queer theory and I enjoy what I'm being exposed to now. I think I'm more into my intellectual side than I've ever been.

BB: Well, this would be wonderful to hear. What are you learning in today's class on contemporary queer theory? What are some things that have really been exciting for you to learn? A snapshot in time of where queer theory was at in 2007.

TO: Well, it's interesting to me to sort of see how academia is reflecting back my experience or not in community work and what I'm always both tickled by and angry about is how the assumption in academia is that the only people doing theory as academicians when of course everybody does theory and some of the queer theorists are very clear about that, although they also tend to forget. But what I see them talking about, which I think is happening on the ground too, is the limits of identity politics and what they would call post-structuralism.

BB: Post-structuralism, yeah.

TO: And sort of really grappling with what it means to understand the complexity of identity without sacrificing the—and this is one of those contradictions, so the complexity of identity without sacrificing the way that constructed identity affects peoples' lives and so that's what I'm reading about. So that's helpful.

BB: Will you say more about the limits of identity and identity politics?

TO: Well, from my point of view, I'm sure I've talked about this before, but where I feel like the workshop takes people and then isn't able to help people move beyond is this idea of understanding ourselves as white people or understanding ourselves as people of color and then having those two identities pitted against each other instead of seen as part of a multiplicity of identities that then play out and that my whiteness is not all that defines me or someone's race or someone's ethnicity or someone's gender is not all that defines them and creating a politic around that identity has real limits. So it would be like a critique of nationalism, which I am a critic of it. So that you'd form a politic around like that's there a woman's identity and all the problems associated with trying to create a politic around what we share in common as women because within our identities as women, there is first of all the whole complication about at what point do we become a woman and what is the gender definition of women and is it because we have two breasts and a vagina or what, the fluidity of that plus the divisions of race, the divisions of sexuality—or not the divisions, the differences in race and sexuality and class and physical ability and all the things that form who we are. So the idea that there's a woman's sensibility or essence is problematic.

BB: I like how Gita Gulati-Partee in *Open Source Leadership* talks about mainstream and margin identities and how we carry many of them and so pushing beyond that wall of identity politics. So you have a New York, gay, wealthy, Jewish man who doesn't speak much English because he's just moved, so all these, differently abled. So what category does that and his full essence fit into? So that's kind of the way she talks about the wall or some of the limitations of the mainstream and margin exercise where she challenges people to think about there isn't a hierarchy of oppressions, but you spending a year in Honduras and feeling

nervous about not being able to speak Spanish isn't the same as a Latino woman immigrant who's lived her whole life, you know, that kind of thing.

TO: I think that understanding the complexity and understanding that different constructions really inform your life at any given moment at any given point and both of those things are true. So instead of the person that you said, "Well I don't see color" as sort of a well, it's true at some level, it's true there is no--. Race is completely constructed so she's absolutely right there is no color in that sense, but color is totally defining our existence. So both of those things are true and so I think that we've been grappling with that in the political arena that I've been in for a long time and it's reflected in academia. But the thing about academia is that they don't understand, they don't quite get that this is something that people do talk about outside of their little ivy walls and are actually living with and grappling with in real terms.

So I enjoy reading about it and I enjoy having some sort of seeing. Right now the stuff we're reading about queer theory is talking about trying to define what queer and so sometimes I get these passages that are really great, that really help me to see things, like there's one by this guy named Donald Hall where he talks about at what point is it that we become gay? Is it the point at which we touch somebody's genitalia? Is it the point at which we long for them in our hearts? At what point? It's such a weird construction, this idea of gay. And the whole thing with Senator Craig, [US Senator from Idaho arrested in August 2007 for homosexual lewd conduct in the men's restroom at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport and entered a guilty plea to a lesser charge of disorderly conduct on August 8, 2007] it's like is he gay or isn't he gay? That's the question. First of all, the question is why are the police hanging out in bathrooms trying to catch people? That's the

question. But then having to decide whether he's gay or not, which really doesn't address the fact that there's a range of sexual desire and that maybe I'm gay in moment and not gay in another moment.

BB: So that means you're bi.

TO: That's right.

BB: Trying to pin people down.

TO: Trying to pin people down while understanding the desire to pin people down by people who have been targeted. So all those things happening and it's how do you talk about all that.

BB: I love that stuff, yeah. In 2006-07 when you were adjunct faculty at UNC-Chapel Hill's School of Social Work, you taught that class on discrimination and inequality and that's when you got the dean's recognition for teaching excellence. That had to feel good though, didn't it? Because students voted for you, is that right?

TO: It comes on a rating scale, yeah. Yes, of course any award, no matter how cynical I try to be, always feel good. I think it's a reflection of many things and not least of which is that I was a white teacher teaching white students about race and about discrimination and it's much easier coming from me than it is coming from many of the other teachers who are teachers of color. So I don't think it's necessarily a reflection of my greater teaching skill. I think it's a reflection that I'm less threatening, that I don't have an agenda if I'm teaching about racism as a white person. So that's what I think it's mostly a reflection of, that, and that unlike most people who teach in a college setting, because I've been teaching it for so long and with the help of many other people, developed a process that I know from years of practice helps people move through those issues with less defensiveness. So I brought with

me my white skin privilege and a lot of experience with a well thought-out process put together by lots of other people. So I think those two things helped me make me a successful teacher of that and I'm teaching now actually a totally new class at the School of Social Work for me.

BB: At the School of Social Work? What is it?

TO: It's called something like "Macropractice" or something, "Social Work Organizations in Communities: Macropractice." So it's basically the point of the course is to give students an opportunity to think about how they might do social work outside of direct practice. So we're talking about organizing and advocacy, community change basically, ways community change happens outside of sort of clinical social work practice.

BB: I think that's really needed. My sister [Robyn Burge], who just got her bachelor's in social work, really longs for that. She wants to do community work and she likes the training piece, she likes even the lobbying piece, but she feels like her heart is--. Just yesterday she got accepted with a job with North Carolina Outreach, I think, and it's pure casework, family intervention, and all that, and she's excited about that and I know she longs for that. So that's interesting. Let's take a quick break.

[break in conversation]

BB: So you have a real strong orientation toward expressing things in visual ways and the way the place is decorated and your collages and painting even. So how did you come into that, those talents and your artistic expressions?

TO: Well, my first memory is and I feel like I've told these stories, but my first memory is that my parents built the house that we grew up in and it was one of these modern split-level houses and it was kind of very blandly decorated and then my parents went away

on sabbatical and rented the house and I had some occasion to come back while the renters were there and she was an artist or something and she had hung these incredibly colorful canvases on the wall and she'd done something to the house and it was transformative and I was like, "Oh my God." That's my first memory of sort of understanding the power of space. So all this happened much later in life, but I've always been somebody who decorated my room or thought about making a nice space for myself. I think I just did it instinctively and then Tom and I had an opportunity to build our own house too and we had friends who were builders and realized it was at the time affordable.

BB: This was the Durham house you lived in before?

TO: Yeah.

BB: Oh, you all built that.

TO: And it's passive solar.

BB: Passive solar?

TO: Mmm hmm. So I went and looked at a bunch of the houses that he had built and got a sense of what was possible from that and I remember the thing that made me want to build a house was that I was in one of his houses and the woman who lived there pulled a kitchen drawer out and it slid out beautifully and then slid back in and there's something about the way I operate where something grabs me, some very small thing grabs me, and then I pay attention. And from that came the desire to build a house, to design a house.

BB: That's a great story.

TO: And so I spent a lot of time in the library just looking at house plans and I did the floor plan and so basically designed this house and it was really fun. I loved the guy that was building it. It was a really good collaboration, although he didn't understand, his only fault

was that he didn't understand that he was making choices. Like I came in one day and he had put faucets on the sinks and I went, "That's a choice I'm going to make." He put switch plates up, he put all the switch plates up, and they were ivory and I didn't change them, I should have, but it was like, "This is a choice and I don't like this choice." So we lived forever with ivory, I mean, little things like that or he put on white trim but brown gutters. I asked him why he did that and he said, "Oh, I thought you wouldn't notice." (laughs) I thought, "You still think I'm not going to notice them?" It's unbelievable. The house was painted like this one, like in seventeen different colors, and so they had found a picture in a magazine of another house painted that way and they hung it on the door and making fun of me. So I really loved it and as a result of that, I decided to go to architecture school, which I hated so I stopped. But at architecture school, because I couldn't draw, I started doing collage and so I credit architecture school with introducing me to collage and so since then I've been a collage artist; so that's kind of how.

And then once I built a house and understood the power of that and the power of— space is incredibly powerful and I kind of knew that, but I also know that just from how people talk about being in nice spaces or coming to our house on Wall Street or coming to this house and talking about how good they feel when they're here. And also I think, having been a workshop leader and having done workshops in terrible spaces and noticing the difference in the—

TO: Dynamic when people are in a comfortable place or a nice place versus workshops that we've done in windowless rooms that don't have circul-- It's important to me. Are you out of time?

BB: Oh no, we have hours to go. I was just looking at the volume. So is there anything in that realm that you haven't done yet that you want to, artist or--?

TO: Well, part of the problem is that once I've participated in creating a space, I want to do it again. I can only move so many times.

BB: Hey, we've got a house, Tema, you could work on.

TO: What I've found is that, it's interesting, people invite me to come and help them and I've stopped doing it because it's more frustrating. People say you should be a whatever it is I would be.

BB: Interior designer.

TO: Right, and the problem is that I want to do it my way. I don't want to work with you to do it your way.

BB: So if you're down with that, I'm your person.

TO: Right, exactly. It's not about helping people realize their vision for me. It's about the specifics for me. If I won the lottery, I would open an art gallery, I think, and have a place where people could buy affordable art and be a venue for people. I just think about in all the different communities that people are doing art that nobody knows about, when we did workshops and we had cultural evenings, which we used to do, the number of poets that are out there, really, really incredible poets that never get published. So I just think that we love having this space so much that if we had a lot of money, we would have even more.

BB: Where did you go to architecture school and what did you hate about it? Why did you hate it?

TO: I went to NC State and I hated it because they, in a very deliberate and excruciating process, helped me to feel like I was less talented when I left than when I went in. It was a horrible place.

BB: Why?

TO: Because the teachers had been there too long. I was there during the mid-90s when computers were just starting to get on the and it was the kind of faculty that tried to resist the computers and was way behind the students in terms of what students were thinking about. I think it was a stereotype of an architecture experience where you do criticisms and the idea was to be more brutal than the next person. I'd been around too long and I'd been in teaching environments too long and it was an incredibly racist place, it was an incredibly sexist place. They prided themselves on figuring out whether a student was good or bad in the first six months and then characterizing them as that for the rest of their four years. It just was horrible.

BB: So how long did you hang in there?

TO: Three.

BB: Three years? Wow.

TO: But I knew pretty early that I should have a backup plan so I always minored in adult education. So I ended up getting out with a masters in adult education.

BB: What year was that again? About mid-90s?

TO: '95, something like that.

BB: How have your feelings about your body changed over time, body image and your body?

TO: That's out of left field.

BB: That's out of left field? Sorry, do you want to stick to—

TO: No, no, why are you asking that? I'm interested.

BB: The honest answer is it was a question Russell Herman suggested and it struck me that that's very interesting that I hadn't asked other women about that because it's huge for women and because I think how we feel about our bodies affects every single thing in our lives. So of course it affects how we go about our work and how we think about issues of oppression and liberation and I want to know, I think it's good for me to know about women that I admire and love and feel so comfortable, particularly like you, you come off to me, you present to me as someone very comfortable with your body.

TO: Really? That's good.

BB: Yeah, so either you're a good faker or you've somehow figured it out. (laughs)

TO: Or both. That's a great question. I was a PE major in college and I feel like I'm repeating stories, but my first real job was at the YMCA in Seattle and one of my jobs there—I didn't tell you this story?—was to fitness test women.

BB: I think I remember about you yelling at the male athletes.

TO: That was when I was in college, but in my first real, I was the fitness and aquatic instructor or director at a very small Y, so director just meant I was one of three staff people, and part of my job was when a woman or anybody came in and signed up for a fitness program, I did what was called a pre-test and it involved flexibility, strength, and then I had a little caliper to measure percent body fat. And I would go in a small room so there's some privacy to do that part and I tested literally hundreds of women and fewer than five out of those hundreds, every one but five said something negative about their body. It didn't matter

what they looked like, their weight, or anything, but every single woman would come in there and make some disparaging remark about her body; so that was happening.

I was very fit because I was teaching a lot of fitness classes and I was bulimic so it was this weird combination of things. And my bulimia, I think, had to do with my feelings of isolation and lack of control and I also have a memory then of going to a doctor for a checkup and his back was to me and he was looking at my chart and he said something about—as I walked in, he hadn't even seen me, he looked at my chart, and says, "It looks to me like you have a weight problem." And I was incredibly fit; I didn't have a weight problem. So all those things were kind of colliding in my brain at the same time.

When I was a PE major in college was the first time I saw someone who was anorexic. Anorexia was just beginning to be understood as a problem or it was beginning to be named. This was in the mid-70s. It was just getting to be named and there was a woman on campus who had it and I would see her in the locker room and you could see her skeleton through her skin and she actually ended up killing herself later. So all these things were kind of playing on me and even though I was bulimic, I made a vow to myself that I would never, ever say anything publicly critical about my body because goddamnit, somebody had to interrupt this cycle of deprecation.

And I understood intellectually that all the energy that we were spending on how we looked and felt about our bodies was energy that could have been spent more productively out in the world and that it was not that all these women were individually fucked up, but that this was a systemic oppression issue that women were having. And these were almost all white women in the Y at that time in Seattle; there weren't very many women of color. So I have kept that vow and then I was an aerobics instructor and felt like a bit part of my role

was to—and also at that time at the Y, we had a really popular aerobics instructor who was heavier than the stereotype of an aerobics instructor and she was very popular, I think, because a) she was in great health, b) she was a great teacher, and c) women loved having somebody who didn't look magazine perfect. And so I think since that time I've made it, whatever my internal feelings, I have externally—I haven't weighed myself since that time. I have no idea what I weigh. I haven't weighed myself since 1977.

BB: Congratulations!

TO: And when I go to the doctor I tell them I don't want to know and they should not tell me and I say it in a very stern voice so that they know I'm serious. When I'm with women who spend a lot of time talking about that, I try and stop it. So that's what I would say about it. I would say in terms of my own internal dialogue that I'm probably not that different from anybody and I have my own judgments; I just try not to actualize them out in the world. I try and dress comfortably and so I try to be comfortable in my body. I try very hard not to put things on my body that make me self-conscious or feel like I have to worry about it. I strive to be attractive, meaning not to fit into society's mode, but to feel good for myself about how I look so that I'm happy with it and that's my standard: am I happy with it?

BB: And your journey and struggle and relationship with bulimia?

TO: I cured myself, which is apparently not that usual and so I don't think that has much meaning. I was very private about it and I think I was bulimic for about four years and I think it just started to stop serving its purpose.

BB: Did something happen with the feelings of isolation?

TO: I think it was tapering off when I met Tom and then when I met Tom, I stopped or I stopped. I actually don't have a lot of memory about that.

BB: Good for you.

TO: Yeah.

BB: Do you remember what was happening when it started?

TO: And I also don't diet because the times that I feel impulses toward bulimia are when I restrict my food so I just don't; I don't tell myself I can't eat things.

BB: Do you remember what was happening when it started and how that was related?

TO: I had moved to Seattle, I was at the Y, I was first time on my own, I was by myself, I didn't really have any friends, I felt out of control. My understanding is that bulimia and anorexia are a lot about control and so I think that's what it was.

BB: And you had also just ended that horrid love affair and that was a big part.

TO: Yeah, right.

BB: So I'm going to ask, if I can ask you about it, about tumultuous affairs or deep loves in your life and the reason, I'm just going to anticipate that—

TO: They're all in my mind. (laughs) I have lots of them, but they're all in my mind.

BB: I'm particularly interested in the love affair you've mentioned a few times, the disastrous love affair, and also your relationship with your mother. I think the reason, the more shameful reasons are a little self-serving of course. I could just act like it's all about the larger theory of how our personal relationships shape us in our movement work and that's definitely part of it because I believe it's true, but also because I feel like some of the most interesting stories in my life, apparently to friends, are the times that—they're rare, not so much anymore—but that I really talked about, the more tragic or intentionally complex or

emotionally complex relationships, the hardest love affairs I've had. Apparently they say a lot about us and I think there's a culture of shame around it and silence too that we don't talk about the ones that were just so huge in our lives and why we think we stayed or left finally and those kinds of things and what we learned from them, how we changed ourselves because of them. So I think those kinds of thinking behind it and stuff. So what was so disastrous about that love affair? And of course, again you can just say you don't want to talk about it.

TO: Well, I'm happy to talk about it. It's not that interesting to me. It was a long time ago, for one, and I just feel like it was part and parcel of my coming to terms or coming into myself and that when I entered into it, I was still of the belief that winning somebody else's love would complete me or help me prove to myself that I was lovable. He was not a nice guy. I think there isn't any huge secret. He was not a nice guy and I was in a place of great need so it was not a good combination. To due him credit, maybe he didn't know how to be nice about not being able to meet needs he couldn't possibly meet. I don't think it was all that important beyond that moment in my life. I think the great love affair of my life is with Tom and just what it's meant to me to be able to be with someone for this long and how surprised I am about it, that I'm still with someone that I've been with for this long and that his capacity to love me is just amazing. I don't think of myself as somebody with a great capacity to love people. So maybe my capacity to love him is also amazing.

In the queer theory class, we're talking a lot about marriage and sexuality and gender. I'm supposed to do a little film for my final project and I was thinking I might do a film that asks people why they get married and particularly people with our politics—like why did we agree to get married? And I think there is this kind of deep symbolism or deep idea of

making this, quote, unquote, lifetime commitment, which of course has nothing to do with marriage per se, you certainly don't need the state to recognize it, but somehow it being recognized is and because it's so ingrained in our culture, the state recognizing it does carry more meaning than any other form or has the potential to carry more meaning; it doesn't have to. The culture gives it more meaning.

As I'm understanding more about the consumption culture that we live in and affluence and all that stuff and the people as commodities and the idea that we can throw each other away or get a better model, I do believe that's affecting our thinking. I have no problem with people coupling and people can get together any way they want. I have no problem with it. I'm not about judging that. It's not about my way is better for other people. I do think I am amazed by the value I have found in staying with one person for a really long time and there's no way to know that unless I do it and I'm not imposing that on anybody else and I just think that there's, for me, something really rich and satisfying about being with somebody this long and going through periods of when I really like him and periods of when I can't stand him and I'm sure the same for him.

BB: What do you think feeling out of control and unlovable for so long, what were some of the key things around that? What made that a reality for you?

TO: I just think it's growing up in my family and my parents weren't present and they're not particularly loving or outwardly loving. They were loving us the way they knew how; it wasn't what I needed. And so I think at one point I thought that my relationships with men, because I have always been attracted to men as far as I know, that I was seeking some kind of validation through relationships with men that I was not able to get because I don't think I or anybody can get them that way. I think the reason that Tom and I worked is

because Tom was looking for somebody to love unconditionally and I needed to be loved unconditionally and that worked for a good twelve years before things started to get a little hairy.

BB: How'd they get a little hairy?

TO: Well, the problem with—didn't we talk about this, the period of separation or almost separation? We joke that he's a pathological nurturer and that the problem with someone who is so focused on my needs means that I had to become responsible for his needs and my needs and he wasn't able to claim his own needs and so we've learned. So he's gotten much better at claiming his own and I've gotten much better at claiming mine and appropriately taking care of our own and then each others without oozing over into the other person's space.

Then another thing I think that really works about our partnership is that I've never, I don't think either of us have ever assumed that the other person was going to provide everything and a recent example of that, I think, is that my father's health is declining and it's been very stressful and hard and I had made a date with Tom because we hadn't seen each other for awhile and he was getting ready to go out of town, unaware that I had made it on the same night as a women's group that I'm part of, and I called him and said that I really need to go to the women's group, I think, and talk about my dad because it was really clear to me that I could talk to him about it and I had, but I would get something from the women that I wouldn't be able to get from him and that was really true and that was not a problem for him and it was not a problem for me.

BB: What was it that you got from the women's group?

TO: Just support that I was doing an okay job. I thought I wasn't doing very well, but just the idea that I was doing okay.

BB: What is the women's group?

TO: It's a group that Claudia [Horwitz] started about six or seven years ago of women. We meet once a month in somebody's house. We eat dinner and whoever hosts it asks a question and we spend the evening answering the question.

BB: How long have you done that?

TO: I think six or seven years, five or six years, a while.

BB: Six or seven years once a month?

TO: I think so.

BB: Wow.

TO: People have left town and new people have come on.

BB: So you haven't talked too much about your relationship with your mom.

TO: I haven't?

BB: You've talked about your mom and her background and your thoughts about things, but about how you and your mom relate and I guess I want to hear more about what it's like.

TO: How we relate now?

BB: Yeah, and how it's changed over time. What was that face?

TO: I can't remember. Well, now she's in bed so the way we relate is I go and visit her and sit with her and sometimes we talk and sometimes we watch a movie and sometimes I show her photographs or figure out some way to try and be entertaining. My take is that she

wasn't all that thrilled about being a mom or even about being a wife, but grew up in a time when it was kind of unthinkable to not and I don't think she had any tendencies to be a lesbian or anything. So I think it was unthinkable not to get married, so she did, and I think that her ambivalence came out in drinking. My memory growing up is that I felt close to her and then at a certain point, I went through my rebellion. But I also always had the sense that I could manipulate her to do what I wanted, like if I wanted clothes or something, I could figure out a way to get her to give me what I wanted. And let's see what else I remember. As I got older and more my own person, I remember I went through a period where I was really angry with her and then I went through a period where we were close and I was really angry with my father. I don't really remember the details of any of those.

The main thing that she did to take care of herself was they bought some land up in the mountains and she'd go every summer and stay there and I know she was very happy there and Dad didn't go very much and she became really close with the neighbors and was active in the church and she felt at home there and I did not. So I didn't spend a lot of time there either, but I was aware that she was doing good, taking care of herself, and happy. And as she got older and unable to do that as much, it was harder for her. I think she also got increasingly unable to meet her own needs. I remember the day I figured out that she was unhappy with us and there was nothing we could do to make her happy and that was a constant dynamic in the family is that we had somehow disappointed her in some way and that she was unhappy and that if we would change our behavior, she would be happy. But in fact, no matter what we did, she would not ever be happy, but we would still be blamed.

BB: You and your brother?

TO: And my father also.

BB: And your father.

TO: As she's gotten older, that has played out more and more overtly and so it's been a very--. At a certain point, I realized that it was a relationship that I was going to have to manage and so I spent my adult life managing my relationship with my mother. I don't feel like we're particularly close.

BB: How do you feel about that?

TO: I just accept it. I don't think I have a feeling about it one way or another; it just is.

BB: Is that true?

TO: Yeah, that's all. I don't know anything else. As you can see, I don't feel particularly sympathetic toward her and I know that's part of the problem is that she doesn't really have anybody who feels sympathetic toward her. I was doing some fundraising for an organization once and I was going to meet with a woman and ask her for some money. She came into the restaurant and sat down across from me or I came in and sat down across from her and the first words out of her mouth were, "Your mother is a very difficult woman." (laughs) I hadn't said my name. I just looked like, "Okay." And I think that she is a very difficult woman. She has very few friends because everybody disappoints her. When she was having hard times, she would go to a therapist, but no therapist was ever good enough. I remember when she was in her early 50s complaining to me that she wasn't happy with her life, but she didn't feel like she could make a change; she was too old. In my head, I knew that she wasn't, but I knew there was nothing I could say. So she's somebody who I feel like has really trapped herself. She and my father are incredible opposites. My father is somebody

who makes the most of everything and my mother is somebody who has sort of created prisons that don't exist.

BB: Do you think it's about depression or—

TO: It could be.

BB: Or something in her childhood?

TO: It could be about depression or about feeling like she's not worth it, feeling at some level never really loved. Intellectually, I get that and I wish I could be that person for her, but I can't do. So I just do the best I can. And she's so focused on what she's not getting that she doesn't—like with my father, who I wouldn't want to be married to him either, but she stayed with him, which I think was a mistake, but she's so focused on what he's not providing, she really misses what he does provide. He doesn't love her in the way that she wants, but he loves her in his own way and she doesn't even see that. So it's hard, it's hard to be around sometimes. She can get really nasty.

BB: Do you think that all of that's directly related to her taking to her bed?

TO: Yes, absolutely, totally, definitely. She took to her bed to try and punish Dad for not paying more attention to her. When I pointed out that that wasn't a particularly constructive strategy, she had like a three-minute period where she admitted that's what she was doing and maybe it wasn't a good idea and that was it.

BB: And stayed.

TO: Mmm hmm.

BB: What's your dad's take on your mom's way of being in the world? He stayed too.

TO: Yeah, he did. I think he loves her. I think he's so focused on his work or has been historically so focused on his work and feels indebted to her, as he should, I think, not indebted, but I think he does owe her some gratefulness for being the one who raised us and took care of things at home while he was working.

BB: And fed him. How do you feel about me asking this?

TO: Oh, it's fine. For some reason, I thought we'd covered it. I guess my only trepidation is that it would be public in some way and she's still alive and I don't--. There's no way she'd ever see it, I don't think, but I don't want to sound disrespectful because I'm very appreciative of a) I think they have both done the very best they could, and b) they've provided me with all kinds of opportunities and some really good values. I think my political values are very much a result of both them and my grandparents and I'm a very lucky person. So I don't mean to sound ungrateful. We don't have much of a relationship and I feel like my decision or my approach is to be a good daughter so that I have some integrity about that, realizing that I've set some pretty clear boundaries and limits as to what I will and won't do. So when she gets in a place where she's really angry or critical, I either listen and don't say anything or I leave the room. I gave up years ago trying to tell her anything meaningful because she doesn't have space for it and I get that.

BB: Have you and Tom, or you and other people in your life, or just you personally, have you made an intentional decision to not have children?

TO: Tom and I tried for a year and we couldn't physically and we had great models of adoptions in his family, but yes, so we decided not to and I am so grateful.

BB: Why?

TO: I never really wanted to have children. I haven't got a maternal instinct in my body. So I'm very, very, very, very happy not to have children. I have two fabulous nephews and that's fine.

BB: Switching gears again—oh, you know what? I've totally lost track of time. Yeah, we just have a few questions left, but I don't want to plow through them because they're kind of—

TO: Tell me what they are.

BB: (laughs) Okay. What's your vision of a liberated world?

TO: Yes. (laughs)

BB: Where do you fall at the moment on the optimism-pessimism spectrum about achieving that?

TO: Yes.

BB: How would your answers to those two questions have varied from time to time in your life? What would you like to talk about that we haven't touched on? How was this process for you? Are there questions that you would have asked in this project that I didn't, that would be good in future interviews? And if you were conducting these for the Heirs collection, who are a few people you'd really hope would be a part of it and why?

TO: Yes, yes, no, maybe. (laughs)

BB: I don't know.

TO: I don't know.

BB: So I say let's do one more, if you don't mind.

TO: Alright.

BB: Okay, great.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Emily Baran. September 2007.