

A Penn Girl's Now and Then

By Cate Gable



I arrived at the Philly airport in the fall of 1968 greener than Yakima, Washington's green valley. Within minutes of landing, I was stunned to find my purse had been stolen—I left it on a bench when I went for my suitcase, standard practice in our tiny rural airport. And, in relatively quick succession, a flood of other revelations followed.

My writing, which I felt was quite good, was torn to pieces by my first Penn English instructor—You want what?! An outline? My star turn on my high school basketball team meant nothing. I sat on the bench for a year, even as a lowly second-stringer, on the Penn women's team before throwing in the towel. I did excel at swimming in the "Penningettes," the college's water ballet team. (I started swimming at five and was a lifeguard every summer during college.) And I joined an eight-voice a cappella singing group that performed with the Baltimore Symphony. (I'd started my "singing career" at three-years-old.) By and large, my transition from small pond to great lake helped me understand, probably only in retrospect, what I might genuinely be good at.

But what did I possess then as a Penn undergrad that has not incrementally increased in my life as a senior citizen? I certainly had more physical strength in my twenties. I was endlessly hopeful and positive, naively believing that everyone had good intentions. I wandered Philly streets with nary a worry about urban violence, unconscious of the dangers in the West Philly slums. (I dormed in the old Walnut Hall at 40th and Walnut, now long gone.)

Back then, in those glorious '70s, disillusionment about politics had not yet set in. The College Hall sit-in seemed to catalyze change. Yay! Then Earth Day happened. Cool! I continued throughout my life campaigning fearlessly for the environment, not realizing until decades later that battles were never definitively won but needed to be continually fought. (And aren't we still in shock about SCOTUS's abortion ruling?)

Now in my own 70s, what am I better at? What do I have more of? Patience maybe, though even here I often fall down. I have to keep reminding myself that any complex task is made of a thousand steps. I more deeply understand friendship and the importance of longevity; how the history friends share provides an irreplaceable foundation for respect and love. (I'm still in touch with my Walnut Hall Penn girl buds, now "Penn women.") I'm a better writer after long years of practice. And I see that those two other features of my Penn days—music and swimming—are aspects of a life that one can sustain and enjoy throughout.

What advice would I give my 20-year-old self? “Don’t worry...this follow-your-nose approach to life is going to work out just fine for you.” There are perhaps a few other things I wish someone had told me: never doubt that writing will carry you; buy a house as soon as you can; don’t listen if/when you’re out of step with the mainstream—they’ll catch up; and travel as soon as you can, to as many places as you can.

Overall, would I go back? Or, as that Holly Near cover, *My Favorite Year* (written by Stephen Flaherty, and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens) asks,

When we
We were young forever yesterday
Fools and little children run away
If we could go back there, would we stay?

I think no, not unless I could take my accumulated wisdom with me to reenter that fresh young body. I would not exchange my lived life. I’m so grateful for where I’ve been and what I’ve done. And I’m still excited about the future.

Penn gave me a solid jumping off point, and, despite my capacity for occasional idiocy and starry-eyed innocence back then, I’ve turned out ok. In Chinook Wawa, the trading language of our local indigenous Natives, there’s a place on the peninsula I now call home which was once called “*No’skwalakuth!*”— or “where the trail comes out.” It’s a place of contentment and beauty.

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