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GLORIA STEINEM INTERVIEW
GLORIA: IN HER OWN WORDS
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GLORIA STEINEM

June 28, 2010

Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt and Sheila Nevins

GLORIA: The Person - *Emergence of Confidence*

Sense of Mortality

13:50:12;05

GLORIA STEINEM:

Life is too short, but of course it's a lot longer than it used to be. I think in the 1900's, we were living to be 50. So, we do have 30 or even 40 years more. But-- I love it so much. I never want it to end.

13:50:45;11

I-- I certainly think about dying now. And I actually make an effort to think about dying, because at 76, if I continue to think I'm immortal, which I do (LAUGHS) it doesn't make me plan very well. You know, so I-- I do try to remember it. And about-- I don't know-- a few months ago, I was standing in my kitchen, thinking, as we all do, "I have to do this, and go-- do that," and you know, all the things of the day. And as if my from my toes, there rose up this-- understanding death is going to interrupt all my plans. And I laughed out out loud in that way that you do, you know, with recognition. So-- it's amazing to me how long we can think we're immortal, and I do hope to live to 100. But I do try to make-- the time limit-- help me understand how precious time is.

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13:51:52;23

You know, I-- I-- I think I always knew time was precious, but I knew it intellectually. I re-- remember-- actually, I don't remember writing time is all there is, but somebody sent it back to me embroidered, so I guess I-- I did. I did write it. But I don't think it-- was absorbed in-- into my life. It was in my head. Some-- somebody said the longest journey is the journey from head to heart. I think my sense of time is making that journey.

14:17:09;19

Aging doesn't scare me. Death is another question. I mean, I-- I experienced-- 50 was hard. Sixty was easier. Fifty was hard because it was-- the end-- the end of something. And-- and I-- the end of the central years of life I suppose, and I treated it with defiance. I'm going to go right on doing-- everything I did before, so there. And it took me at least three or four years to realize that doing everything I did before was not progress. (LAUGHS) So, maybe I should look forward. And 60 was-- an entry into a new country. Sixty was very positive.

14:17:57;26

And 70-- and 76 now-- you know, you-- our consciousness of mortality. Because I look back at something that happened 30 years ago, and it seems quite recent. I have to realize that I may not be here 30 years from now, and it's very poignant.

14:18:21;12

I try to hang onto it. I try to-- to use it in a positive way, to make me use my time better.

01:23:12;24

When I first got-- a diagnosis of breast cancer, which now is more than 20

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years ago-- I-- I had already-- I had just come to the end of a period in a way, because the magazine had been sold. And so, I had that feeling of coming to the end of something. And I said to myself kind of without thinking about it, kind of ironically, "So, this is how it's going to end." And then, again, up from the bottom of my toes, like unconsciously, "I've had a wonderful life." And that was worth a lot. You know, that-- that realization. Of course, then I immediately began to fight like crazy.

01:24:08;23

And fortunately, you know, I had a-- tiny lump excised while I watched them do it right here. I had-- radiation and no chemotherapy, so I was very, very lucky. I remember getting out of the hospital and going to Barbra Walters's wedding that night. (LAUGHS) So-- and dancing. So, I was really lucky that I haven't had a recurrence.

01:24:35;16

But in a way, it served a real purpose, of making me a little bit more conscious of time. I'm still, you know, really profligate with time, I fear. But also, the moment of saying I've had a wonderful life was-- at 54, whatever I was, was-- I remember that.

01:25:04;12

It was found, as most cancer-- breast cancer is, by me. You know, not by-- and in fact, the mammogram I had-- a couple of mammograms didn't show it. And finally, the women's clinic I was going to said, "Well, you know, let's take it out and see what it is." And to everyone's surprise, it was malignant.

01:25:25;23

Just-- just inadvertently. It wasn't as if I was so careful about doing breast exams. But it was in that kind of-- I just felt a lump right here. It was perhaps

palpable early because it was on the muscle here. So, it's a great lesson in the importance of self-exams.

01:25:50;24

The-- the doctors are wrong in saying I think-- if they're saying the mammogram is more important than self-examination, because for one thing, they're our own bodies. We're more familiar, you know, so we're more likely to recognize something unusual. And also, mammograms, even when they're well read, which they usually are not-- are inaccurate in about 15 percent of the time.

14:18:43;01

I-- I don't have-- faith in an afterlife or a belief in an afterlife. I don't believe in God in the usual sense of believing in God. But I-- I do believe that-- as the physicists say, nothing is destroyed. So, somehow, our molecules change form, and become part of the cycle. I don't know what that looks like.

14:19:23;01

The scary part of-- of death is-- first of all, I love it here. You know-- I-- I tried to write a book once about people's last words. For instance, I changed the wallpaper here in-- you know, (LAUGHS) because I read Oscar Wilde saying in his hotel room in exile in Paris, his last words were, "Either that wallpaper goes or I do." I thought, "Well, I'd better like my last wall covering, right." And I was thinking about what my last words would be, and I can only-- right now, anyway, I can only think of saying-- I've so loved being here.

Survivor

02:16:02;20

GLORIA STEINEM:

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Well, I-- I imagine, I think, I'm a (CHUCKLE) survivor (SIGH), which is unrealistic, you know? It isn't-- it's the circumstance-- is overwhelming. You know, the-- the problem with saying I'm a survivor is that it could end up blaming the victim for not being strong enough (CHUCKLE) to survive if you see what I mean. So I-- I think I have that odd and perhaps unrealistic feeling because-- I was on my own a lot as a child and because I was kind of making do or-- because I had to learn how to make a connection with people in order to survive somehow, you know?

02:16:48;02

It-- it just-- you know, I can think of all kinds of circumstances which could've turned bad and didn't. You know, I can 'member g-- getting off a bus or a streetcar when I was about, I don't know, 12 or 13-- and being approached from behind by somebody who wanted to do I know not what to me, a man-- and who said something like, "Turn this way," or, "Get in the car," or something.

02:17:14;20

And I remember saying, "Well, then kill me because I'm not-- you know, you can either (CHUCKLE) kill me or-- or-- or walk away because I'm not doing it." And he actually walked away. Well, I mean, you know, that's just luck. But also, it's because I was not hurt or-- or hit as a child. So, I had a sense of myself, you know, like a cat has a sense (CHUCKLE) of themselves. I remember-- sitting next to a man-- who was an author, a very nice guy, on a couch in somebody's office.

02:17:48;29

We were waiting for them to come. And he grabbed my hands like this. You know, my hands were crossed. He grabbed my wrists and kissed me. And I

was so instantaneously unthinkingly angry that he grabbed my wrists that I bit him. Blood (CHUCKLE) was running down his-- he was very nice about it. Ever after, I used to see him and he would see, "See, I have a little scar."
(CHUCKLE)

02:18:14;09

I didn't think about it. I just did it. And I think that instinct is probably in all of us as a self-protective instinct. But if you've been beaten or humiliated or put down as a child, you th-- you-- you know, you think you can't do that, you know, because you haven't been able to do it. So it's just luck.

EXTERNAL IMPRESSIONS VS. INTERNAL REALITIES

Knowing Gloria Steinem

14:34:01;25

GLORIA STEINEM:

I—you know, every generation has-- has its own names. And it should. And sometimes, moms will say to me, my daughter doesn't know who you are and be-- appalled by that, or disapproving. And I always say to them, "**That's okay, the point is your daughter knows who she is.**" **That's the point.** Now, we do need to know our history. It-- it helps us realize that nobody gives you everything. You have to do it yourself. But-- I-- I like the fact that-- young women are not grateful. I mean, Susan B. Anthony said, "Our job is not to make young women grateful. It's to make them ungrateful so they keep going."

14:34:57;15

Yeah, I want credit, but I want credit as part of a process. And I also want credit as somebody who empowers other people. You know, not who-- did

something no one else can do. That would be self-defeating.

Confidence and Self-Authority

14:37:00;12

GLORIA STEINEM:

No. I don't-- I'm-- well, I'm-- I'm there because I'm here with you, but-- after this interview is over, I'll be walking around for two days thinking, "And another thing." (LAUGHS) And, "Why didn't I say this." You know, so I-- I second-guess myself all the time.

14:37:26;02

Well, it-- you know, I think-- if I were to write "A Revolution from Within" over again, I think I would use the term self-authority, not self-esteem. Because self-esteem is wrongly confused with ego. Self-authority has more to say that, you know, you can make decisions or trust your-- inner voice or, you know, and I think-- I think mostly I can do that.

14:37:57;01

But the counterforce to that for me is that-- because of the way I grew up, because-- through it just happened that I didn't go to school, and I wasn't focused on it that much, I grew up feeling I was invisible. That the only way I could make myself visible was to be useful. So, I can easily, you know, get-- into saying yes to things I shouldn't say yes to.

Self-Introspection

02:22:51;06

GLORIA STEINEM:

Well, I-- I'm not sure I exactly avoided introspection. I just didn't know it

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existed. (CHUCKLE) You know, in the Midwest, at least where I grew up, if you were unhappy, you had a reason. You know, your father just lost his factory job and you didn't know where your money was coming from. Your, you know, out-of-work cousin was sleeping on the living room couch. You-- s-- you know, something bad had happened.

02:23:20;00

I don't remember that-- the idea of-- of a mood or introspection was part of my life until I got to college. And then I discovered-- you know, I would come down to breakfast and some-- and a woman would be looking miserable. And I would say, "What's wrong?" And she would say, "Nothing, I'm just in a bad mood." And I thought, "Gosh, this is fantastic." And I immediately started to have moods. I thought (CHUCKLE)-- but I always knew that I could snap out of it in a minute. (CHUCKLE) Then there-- then introspection came after that. You know, I began to realize that-- only after I was 50, I think, that the (CHUCKLE) the reasons that I was doing something were not all in the present.

02:24:02;25

I know that sounds, you know, really simpleminded. (CHUCKLE) But I really didn't understand it. I thought I was responding to objective reality. I didn't understand the degree to which my response was being magnetized by things that had happened to me before. So, that was a huge leap forward. And I think that realization came out of being depressed-- or as depressed as I've ever been, which is not-- it was never immobilizing.

02:24:35;25

But, there was a period of time in which the world was kind of black and white instead of in color. You know, and I began to realize that (CLEARS

THROAT) if I-- I mean, the simpleminded example is that if I went into a hotel room, they leave the radio on frequently. And I w-- would leap across the room and turn the radio off because I found the sound incredibly depressing.

02:25:05;09

So, suddenly it dawned on me, "Wait a minute, I don't find television depressing. And I don't find the radio music depressing. So why?" Well, actually that was the only sound in the apartment with my mother. But it had taken me all that time to connect it.

Regrets

02:21:11;23

GLORIA STEINEM:

Well, I've wasted time incredibly. You know, I-- I've kept on doing things I already knew how to do just because they seemed helpful or necessary instead of doing what scared me, you know, which is-- a sign of growth I think. Fear is a sign of growth. So if I-- my main regret, I think, is not having done-- not-- having headed into the new but continued to do what I th-- thought was helpful but I wasn't necessarily learning from it.

02:22:00;26

Yes, I-- I think probably-- I hate to generalize. But I do think women probably-- first of all, we are kind of empathy sick. You know, we-- we know what someone else is feeling more than we know what we're feeling. So that makes it hard to know what you want, you know, and what-- what you need and what constitutes learning. And you feel responsible for the other person's wants and needs. So it's-- it's harder to keep exploring, to keep taking the h-- the-- the personally adventurous road.