

AN EXCERPT FROM

Rear-View Reflections on Radical Change



Linda Mary Wagner



SEPTEMBER 1975

When the Party is Over:

Ruminations After My 1975 USA Travel Adventure

Part I

My boyfriend and I worked at low-skilled jobs just before and after we graduated from college, to get enough money to do something we really wanted to do – travel around the United States. We wanted the leisure time to enjoy each other, the excitement of seeing new places and meeting new people, the education of looking at this entire large country into which we were born and raised.

In some ways, to some people, it was a poor investment for our future. Now our money is gone, and we are again working at low-paying, low-skilled jobs, far away from friends and most of our family. Like so many other Americans, we must move around to get ahead, and start from scratch all over again.

We traveled in a slant-six Dodge Dart, camping out and staying with relatives, from Buffalo south to Florida, across Louisiana and Texas to southern California and up the West Coast highway to Eugene, Oregon, and then back over the Rocky Mountains, to the Grand Canyon, and much more, landing in Lexington, Kentucky. We took photos on a Kodak instamatic, the 126x. We rode the cable cars in San Francisco and discovered they actually had signs for Rice-A-Roni on the backs of the cars.

During that trip in 1975, I noticed many things that were different from the world in which I grew up.

- Changing roles of the family, including women loving women and men loving men and establishing homes together, evident in San Francisco
- How changing yourself can imply changing your behavior OR changing your attitudes, and how changing our attitudes can result in behavioral changes
- That condominiums or other planned housing with rules about who can live in or even visit planned communities is segregating the middle class by age and family status
- In the cities, there was a trend toward murals on the sides of buildings
- An overwhelming diversity of interest groups
- Localities or regions were focused on issues that had national import but only local awareness, such as:
 - o The Attica inmate trials in Buffalo;
 - o The reclaiming of the inner city by the wealthy in Philadelphia;
 - o Castro's Cuba in the news in Florida but not evident elsewhere;
 - o Throughout the deep South, we heard about the trial of Joan Little, an African American woman jailed for breaking and entering, whose defense for killing a jail guard in Wake County, North Carolina, was that she was defending herself against sexual assault (In August, 1975, Little was acquitted by a jury of black and white men and women.)
- Natural flows of water are being diverted by a variety of local, state, federal forces and a range of business interests, including corporate agribusinesses.
- The USA rests on an underlying continental plate that can move, break, and split.
- Americans are plagued with self-doubt.
- Signs of climate change are everywhere.

It was so clear that there are vast differences between occurrences that are natural and those that are man-made. It felt frightening that we have tampered so much with the wilderness that we have made ourselves increasingly subject to its changes, not less so. Our society's framework is top-heavy. The complex of corporate-military-industrial-bureaucratic institutions still rests on the crust of the earth. Everywhere we traveled, people noted significant changes in their local weather in recent years. We found so many examples of radical changes in natural phenomena, whether due to lumber companies, oil companies, corporate agriculture, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers or local or state agencies that it seemed feasible that weather changes could be occurring because of human interferences in natural processes. For example, we learned that water from the Colorado River that once flowed to Northern Mexico has been diverted for crop irrigation in California. Aside from the international political ramifications of such an act, the man-made removal of large natural flows of water to another location must eventually change weather patterns and geological processes in both areas.

Our society is in constant motion – the motion of cars every day, the motion of ideas and information that passes through our minds, the motion of the places we call home, the motion of shifting values. But many people in our society are less mobile and not ready to accept change. They are invested in what constitutes their lives now. They are reluctant to enjoy the appearance of novelty in their world. They are happy with the way things are for them and so they fear change. Unfortunately, many of those orchestrating the rapid changes in our world have no regard for those fears and no interest in seeking to alleviate or compromise with them.



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Have Faith

Once a friend said to me, "If you started a new religion, I'd belong to it." She was a secular feminist Jew and I had been raised Roman Catholic. Her comment may have been a tremendous compliment. But it also demonstrated that many of us crave a new "religion."

So many of the values in our established religions no longer apply easily to the conflicts in our lives. It's important to remember that God, nature, and the universe haven't changed their essence since those religions were founded. But the world has evolved. Religions are tied to historical periods and tied to human experience. But God, nature, and the universe, as basic principles, remain. And frankly, they could all get along just as well without us.

It's important to remember that. Scientists tell us that the human species did not always exist. Even our religions tell us that. If we have imagined a universe without the human being, is it so hard to imagine that the human species might disappear again?

Time has not eroded the wisdom of the saying, "Necessity is the mother of invention." Now, the necessity is that we cooperate and understand each other. What will we invent to do that? The possibilities are endless. Bringing women into full equality is one way of reaching our goals. Why? Because for untold centuries, women have carried on traditions and values of cooperation, compassion, understanding. Throughout human history, woman has been delegated the role of keeping the family intact.



But the family has grown. People of different skin colors and cultures have embraced each other and mingled throughout the centuries. Women have a new, much larger family in their care. And we must do it as passionately as we care for our very own individual child.

The entire human family is in jeopardy. We face real threats of self-extinction. Women know this in our bones. Women who rave so emotionally against abortion on demand know this. They know that when society encourages abortion, society is in jeopardy. But those anti-abortion advocates do not identify the correct source of the danger. They lash out at symptoms because they fear the message that the symptoms represent.

Many of us who struggle for the right to abortion on demand fear the underlying danger itself. For when society does not nurture the mother, how can she nurture the child?

Despair creeps in. Shouldn't we simply retreat to our homes? Won't that solve this crisis? No, because the crisis is IN our homes. The crisis permeates our very existence. Where can we turn?

Jesus gave us the message: Love your neighbor. We need a variation on that theme today. I say: Believe in yourself, then believe in your neighbor. Believe in each other.

The prophets have always been men. Perhaps God has ordained in heaven an equal rights amendment for women. Perhaps the new message bearers are women.

But who is listening?



1995

Building the Vocal Majority

In recent months, I've exercised my personal freedom of speech anonymously in chat groups on the Internet.

This was not always the case. In 1969 and '70, I was a teenaged anti-Vietnam war protester in an Air Force town. It took courage to speak out and be clearly identified, along with a handful of other pariahs, in my conservative Catholic and military community. To my once-beloved parents, I had become one of the "bums" that President Nixon blamed for ruining the American dreams of prosperity, law, and order.

But a greater law and order was at stake – a moral order outlined by St. Augustine, who had developed a strong theory of just war. After learning about it in Christian Doctrine class at school, I firmly believed that my government, whether its leaders were Democrat or Republican, had violated the sacred precepts of this theory. What seemed worse, my Church did not strongly condemn this injustice against humanity in accordance with its teaching. By the age of 16, I felt robbed of my faith in human institutions of authority. My conscience called me to speak out, but as a naïve high school student, I "acted out," and suffered the consequences.

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Last night, as I watched a documentary about Richard Nixon, I recalled nightmares I had after we learned Cambodia had been bombed – my sleep disturbed by the total blackout of news access, by earlier images of napalmed Vietnamese children with peeling skin, by steady streams of body bags holding young American men, and by the terror of nuclear confrontation with the USSR. Later, at the time of the Nixon impeachment hearings, I felt that he had been let off the hook for his greatest crimes – those of misleading the American public for four more years in an immoral war he could have ended swiftly and with dignity in 1969, if truth rather than power had been his guiding force.

Now, at the age of 43, I can clearly see how my deepest feelings and many of my concepts about American politics and government were shaped in the decade between 1963 and 1973, from the time I was 11 until 21.

These formative years were plagued by such national dramas as:

- Assassinations and funerals of a President, a Presidential candidate, peaceful civil rights leaders, and student anti-war protesters;
- A war that made no moral or military sense;
- Abuses of power by a President, an FBI Director, and courts of law;
- Civil upheaval and violence with such frequent video of police brutality on national TV that Rodney King seems like a faint, distant echo;
- A burgeoning drug trade and frequently corrupt law enforcement that allowed organized crime to control the ghettos and stretch into middle-class suburbs.

Now tested by the responsibilities of parenthood, marriage, a household, a professional job, and building and maintenance of a local community, I continuously search for the moral compass I've had to forge outside institutions. In today's political climate, I am reaching for the voice of courage in which I once spoke about the nation and world. But I choke and struggle for words and convictions.

There is no one stifling my dissent now. I only have to say what I believe. To that end, I thank God for the restoration of faith that has come from memories, history, and experience outside the years 1963 to 1973.

I believe in government that is accountable to the people. And I believe the freshmen Republicans who want to tear it down now represent, despite their twisted rhetoric, forces like those that destroyed my faith during those crucial years of American history. The current House and Senate leadership should be ashamed for catering to such destructive impulses. Congressional representatives who have abandoned positions of leadership should be censured for turning their backs on a fight that must be fought.

A third party and an election will not come soon enough. We must hold elected officials, at every level, accountable now, as they shape policies that affect our lives.

We are the people who overcame slavery, set limits on robber barons, brought fascism to its knees, built a world-class economy, and sent images of our fragile planet spinning in space to the world. I have never lost faith in the American people. Help me keep this faith and make our voices loud and clear.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Linda Mary Wagner

Linda Mary Wagner spent more than a dozen years as an independent journalist, primarily for National Public Radio and its member stations in Buffalo and Chicago. She later worked as a communications specialist for The Brooklyn Historical Society, Consumers Union, and Associated Press. While earning her Masters in Public Administration from Columbia University, she forged a third career in nonprofit leadership and management, from which she retired in 2020. Currently living with her husband in Albany, New York, Ms. Wagner is the mother of a son and daughter who have graced her with a total of five grandchildren.



“I am a Green
Grandma for Climate
Action NOW”

- *Linda Mary Wagner*

REAR-VIEW REFLECTIONS *on* RADICAL CHANGE



A Green Grandma's Memoir and Call for Climate Action

LINDA MARY WAGNER

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