

Building a Bridge for Others to Cross: The Serendipitous, Intersecting Stories of Two Same-Sex Couples Who Made a Home in Amish Country

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For the next hour or so, our paths are going to be intersecting unlike any other people in any other time or place in the world. We have this opportunity today to make a connection. My talk is about that intersection and what happens when something positive arises. I derive the line “What is fragrance to a flower?” from a poem by Kahlil Gibran. Why does a flower exude fragrance? That seems like an ordinary question. If you go back to maybe fifth- or sixth-grade science class, you might recall when you learned what flowers are doing when they exude fragrance: calling pollinators to them. They invite. They allure. They say to the little bees and the hummingbirds, “Come visit me. I’m sweet. I’m fragrant. I might even be playful.” Today we’re going to talk a little bit about fragrance and what kind of fragrance you might exude. How do you invite, allure, and attract others?

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk, teaches us that every droplet from the ocean has inside it the constitution of the ocean. You have information about the ocean inside droplets, and the ocean is comprised of millions of these droplets. What does that mean for us? We know that, according to physicists, from studying the minute, we get information about the universe. In the smallest microcosm, we’re inextricably interconnected to the macrocosm. So, what is it that makes us truly us? Each word, each dream, each thought, each vision, each prayer? That’s a lot. It’s sort of like saying that, as Gandhi teaches us, if ever you want to change the world, change the way you think of it. In a sense, it’s saying that you have the whole world, not just at your fingertips but at the tip of your tongue.

If ever you want to change the world, change the way you speak of it. Change the way you think about and speak of yourself because, in your dorm rooms, in the classrooms, out in the fields, on the court, you have an opportunity to hold the world in your fingertips. Sometimes it can happen in just a smile. Sometimes it can happen just in a glance. It can happen in a hug or a high five. Sometimes you can unleash somebody’s potential with just a few words. But you do make a difference in the smallest microcosm, which is inextricably interconnected to the macrocosms. If ever you truly want to change or

be the difference you want to see in the world, as Gandhi also teaches us, then go ahead and hold on. Hold onto your courage, your heart, your love, your inspiration.

This is just a way of getting to the beginning of you. What do you do to make sure that your flower, the scent of you is fragrant? How do you attract the world to you? I suggest to you that what you put out, what you exude, is also going to come back to you. It might not be immediately, but eventually you will breathe yourself back in. You will digest yourself the next day. As I speak right now, I'm using breath. My breath is uttered into this room, and then I breathe myself back in. From physics, we know that when you drop a pebble into a pond, it changes the constitution of the pond. If you will, hold on to that imaginary pebble in your hand. We're going to create an imaginary wishing well. Now you're going to toss that pebble. In one word, one wish, what is it that you were wishing for in your heart right now? [The audience members contribute words; Fala echoes them.] Clarity. Gratitude. Creativity. Hard work. Happiness. Peace. Diversity. Beauty. Innovation. Health. Hope.

All right, now we're going to stir up the air. Take a deep breath. You just breathed in all of those well wishes, and now you carry them with you. It's like what happens when you take a bite out of an apple and the fiber and the sugar go into your body and change the constitution of you. That's what happens when you nibble on a conversation, but it's not just with words. We also do it with thoughts. How do you think of yourself? How can you change those thoughts so that you see yourself as more of the beautiful, wondrous, amazing, awesome microcosm of the universe that you are? No pressure. These sacred intersections of our thoughts, stories, emotions, words, hugs, smiles, and high fives, from the smallest to the largest, mean something and do something.

We're talking about one of those moments in life when we were looking for something good, something good happened to find us. The other day, I had a student in my office who had just recently fallen in love. He was exuding love. There was sparkling light, if you will, coming from him, and I could see that that's all he wanted to talk about. I was so happy to be in the presence of *Eros*. I didn't want to hurry him. You know when you're around and surrounded by people who are expressing and experiencing and embracing love. What does it mean for us to be in the presence of *Eros* and to attract love to ourselves? Love is not only the only thing we attract; we can attract compassion and justice, peace, diversity, hope, and happiness. All of those wondrous things that you wished for you can attract.

I'd like to tell you a story that involves these moments of attraction, moments of serendipity. They're all derived from a book called *We Built the Bridge* that is being published as we speak. (See Figure 1.) Dawn Hayes, a professor in the education department at Juniata, sketched all of the illustrations. She is a key part of this story as well, but before I tell you the story, it's important for you to know that the story is about serendipity and adaptability. For the purposes of this presentation, I'm only

focusing on serendipity. If you'd like to learn more about adaptability and adapting to a new culture, I encourage you to read the book.

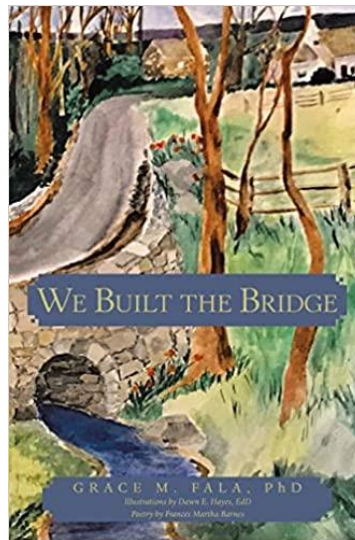


Figure 1. The wrap-around cover of *We Built the Bridge*, shown above, features Dawn Hayes's painting. It depicts the stone bridge that Grace and Franny built, the home, and the stone sanctuary.¹

I want to give you a little background that is important to understanding the story. When I was growing up as a young queer person back in the 1970s before the Internet, way before gay marriage, there was not a space where you could dream, hope, or trust in the future. There was a kind of war zone going on with discriminatory, and I use this word very mindfully and purposely, terror. It was terror, and any queer person who has survived that time lived through a war zone. We needed to focus on surviving; we couldn't focus on much of anything else. The traditional ideas of getting married, having a family, and living in a home were somebody else's fairy tales. We had to concoct our own fairytale. Sharing a living space was something symbolically significant. It was the closest thing that we could get to being married. When two women moved in together, you were making a statement about each other's commitment to love. We were not dreaming; we were surviving. For us, there were no happily-ever-afters, no hopes, no dreams. Gay marriage wasn't even in the consciousness. That's an important part of the story.

A unique kind of relational arrangement between two women that was somewhat acceptable during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was referred to as a Boston marriage. Derived from the book *Surpassing the Love of Men* by Lillian Faderman, Boston marriages occurred when two women wanted to choose and pioneer a pathway for themselves, especially if that pathway didn't involve a man.² They often used education as a tool to save their lives. At the time, it was really hard for a woman not to marry a man. Marrying a man would give you security on every level. With advanced education, though, women could become more self-sufficient and independent. Two women, often educated, often employed, would share expenses of the household. This was before concepts like lesbian, gay, bisexual,

transgender, intersexual, and asexual were even in our discourse. This kind of relationship was referred to as a Boston marriage. That's a little bit of history that will be helpful in showing you the serendipity of this story. Into our lives enter two women in a Boston marriage, Grace Straley and Frances Barnes.

It must have been spring break about twenty years ago, and I was meeting a friend who once worked here, Tracy Houston. I went to this very busy pizzeria in State College to meet Tracy, who was late. Because it was a sunny day, the crowd had just started to swell. There I was, alone at a table for four, feeling very awkward because, as the crowd looked at me, they seemed to say, "Why are you there all by yourself?" I felt awkward, so I left my jacket to mark my territory, went out to my car, and grabbed a newspaper from a recycling box. I went back in and started to hide my embarrassment behind the fold of a newspaper.

Waiting for Tracy to show up, I didn't want to see the people who were looking at me. There, as I was looking through an old, crumpled, recycled newspaper, I saw a listing. It was about the size of a match box, and it described a home somewhere in this place called Belleville, Pennsylvania. At the time, I was living in Boalsburg. Dawn and I had just been to Belleville the day before for spring break. It was a beautiful sunny day. We thought we would never move to Belleville, populated by mostly Amish communities, but something mesmerized me in reading this ad; we had been looking for a home. We must have looked at 75 homes in 75 different places. Dawn and I wanted to buy a home together. Dawn, by the way, who is the illustrator of the book in which I tell this story, is also my wife. I brought the ad home, and we both started holding onto it like a kite string in the palms of our hands. We were so enchanted by the description that we decided to drive to see it. It was sunset. We looked at it and peered through the windows. Nobody was home. We were a little giddy, and we thought to ourselves, "Hey! This is kind of cool." We found that there happened to be an open house the next Saturday, the same day I was scheduled to go to Shippensburg University to facilitate a workshop for Queer youth. Belleville happened to be on the way. We said, "Let's check out this house together."

The next Saturday, we were easily the first ones there. We were anxious to see it. We drove over a stone bridge and pulled into the driveway, and two people, the owners George and Patty Knapp, came out to meet us. They were from New York, and Patty said, "Welcome to the open house."

We went into the kitchen where there was all this artwork on the walls. She looked at us and said, "Welcome to Stonebridge. This house was built in the 1960s by two gals who were in their sixties." Both of them were school teachers. One was an artist, the other a writer. One was named Grace and the other, and I looked at her: Did she just say that one was named Grace? Two school teachers? Two school teachers?! Two women in the 1960s in Belleville? You need to know that Belleville is an Amish community. In Belleville, two women in the 1960s, two school teachers, one named Grace. If she was going to say the other was named Dawn, I was going to pass out. She said, "The other was named

Frances." I looked out and saw a little statue of Francis of Assisi on her kitchen counter, and I thought, "Now, there's a mystic that I can relate to." So, dumbfounded, I looked at Dawn and said, "Did she just say that this house was built by two women, two school teachers, one an artist and the other a writer?" Dawn didn't seem to know what's going on either. Both of us were dazed, but in an instant, I fell into this trance. Who are they? What were the odds?

We walked around the house, looking at the little nooks and crannies and thought, "How cute, this strange yet charming house!" The story of Grace and Frances kept circling around in my head. At one point, I lost Dawn. I looked around from room to room and went upstairs. There she was, tears falling from her face. She didn't know what was happening, but this house had been built by two women in the 1960s who, we later found out, were in a Boston marriage in Belleville among the Amish. The next thing you know, we were introduced to their stories. One, the writer, the other the artist, the gardener. We went outside to meet George, who told us, "You know that bridge you just drove over? That was built by the gals. Can you imagine two gals in their sixties building a bridge like that?" I said, "That is really amazing."

Then Dawn saw something hanging from a tree. She said, "That's a Jack Troy piece." Jack Troy is professor emeritus at Juniata College and an internationally renowned potter. He did a lot of prestigious art shows. Dawn recognized this because she had once studied under Jack Troy. I said, "No, way. That can't be a Jack Troy piece. It's just not going to happen. What are the odds that Jack Troy knew these two people, Grace and Franny?" She said, "No, I'm pretty sure it's a Jack Troy piece," and it was.

In the mudroom, we saw a plaque with two tools, two trowels, that says *Pontem Fecimus*. I knew that *ponte vecchio* meant old bridge. *Pontem*, I was guessing, was bridge, and I put it together: "We built the bridge." Their two tools are still hanging there. It was a moment of enchantment. On our way to Shippensburg that day, we passed the place where Grace Straley lived. We said, "Now we know where she lives, in this place called Valley View Retirement Center. We've got to meet this warrior. We've got to meet this pioneer." Frances, we had heard, had already passed away.

The next weekend, my sisters were coming to visit. Now, to get four people who lead very busy lives to come to our house takes a year of planning. They happened to be coming the day of the second open house and would be able to give their blessings. Some of my colleagues, who are here and also lived through this, will remember the ethos of this moment because I would come in, talk about it, and ask, "Can you believe this and that?" They said that Belleville is far. We test drove it, only to find that Belleville is actually closer to Juniata than Boalsburg. The distance from campus only seemed far, probably because of cultural differences. But, the question remained, how could two women possibly live together among the Amish?

Serendipity not only awakens that sense of surprise for something that seems fitting, it also stirs a spirit of celebration. We soon learned that the house was going up for auction and, the day of the auction happened to be Dawn's birthday! It happened that Dawn's parents were driving in from Philadelphia to celebrate her birthday, so nothing had to be preplanned. There was serendipity in all of the sequencing that put the story together. Dawn, of course, did the bidding. The auction itself is an entire chapter because it was hysterical. Neither of us had ever been to an auction, let alone one to buy a house, and it was freakishly hysterical. We won the auction. The most poignant moment of that evening was that thirty to thirty-five people, Amish couples, husbands and wives with families, stood at sunset in the drizzle and lined up to greet us. As I held their hands to greet them, as I recall, the men's hands were very calloused, hardworking hands. In each case, they would say my name. "Grace, isn't that something? The other gal that lived here, her name was Grace." The next hand, "Oh, you gals are schoolteachers? Isn't that something that the other gals that lived here were school teachers, too?" They would say, "Oh, neither of you is married? Isn't that something? The other gals, the spinsters that lived here, they weren't married either."

The Amish people were there to greet us that night, and I could feel my knees wobbling because there was such amazing acceptance. Here I was stereotyping them as these conservative, unusual people who believed two women who want to love each other could never share a home, a neighborhood. People would say to me, "Wow, I expected you two to live in State College because how on earth are you going to be able to live and share a home together among the Amish?" I would catch myself in the echoes of my own thoughts.

We later met Grace Straley. She was at Valley View Retirement Center, just a couple miles down the way. The first day we scheduled a meeting with her, we planned in advance, which was probably something we should not have done because she was expecting strangers to visit her and, for the hours after they told her that she was having guests, she was probably feeling anxious and unsettled. The first day was not a very clear day for Grace. She was already suffering with dementia. When we went, I tried my best to introduce the topic of Dawn and me being like her and Frances. She didn't want any part of the conversation. She just kept saying, which one of you is the artist? Which one of you is the writer? Write your names down. Write your names down. In her room, there was only one picture, and it was a painting of the house. The first day we met Grace, we said to her, "Grace, we would love for you to come and visit us someday." We want to hear the stories about the house, and she said, "I'm going to have to check with my doctor to see if I can handle it." That was the clearest thing she said that first visit.

A few weeks went by, and we went back to visit Grace. This time, our visit was unannounced, and Grace was welcoming. She was having a clear day. She said, "Come on, I want to show you the gardens." She brought us down to the gardens at Valley View and started to ask us to identify different

types of flowers, testing us like a teacher would. It was an artist-to-artist heart-to-heart. Then we talked about the media of art. As I played with the daisies and danced with the flowers, we shared about three hours with Grace that day, and *Eros* had its magical presence in the gardens with Grace. Again, I tried to approach the topic: "Grace, Dawn and I are in a relationship much like maybe you and Frances." "That was a long time ago," she said. She had been well trained not to even use the pronoun "we." Having lived in the seventies, I know what that training was like, but it must've been even rougher for them. We talked about it, and I wanted her to know that it was going to be me and Dawn living in her and Fran's home. When we said that we wanted to bring her home, she said, "I'm ready right now. I don't have to ask any doctor. I'm ready right now." I said, "Grace, we've got to wait until we get the key."

When we finally got the key, we moved in on the hottest weekend of the century. That was the summer of 1999. About a month later, we bought a mug that said "Grace" on it. We filled it with candy and set it aside for our next visit with Grace. This time we planned to bring her "home" for a reunion with her flowers and birds. First, we were sitting and waiting for Jim, our neighbor, a plumber, to finish the plumbing. We said to him, "Jim, we're going to go visit with Grace Straley today. Do you know her?" He said, "Oh, Grace and Fran. Sure, everybody knew them around here. The arboretum. The flowers. You could always see Grace out there working in the gardens with her working boots, and she looked the part." We said we were going to go celebrate her birthday, but Jim said to us, "Oh, I'm pretty sure that Grace has passed." I said, "Oh, no. It's Franny who passed." He said, "No, I'm pretty sure Grace has passed. You might not know this, but my wife works up at Valley View, and I'm pretty sure Grace has passed." I said, "We were just with her. Now that we have the keys, we're going to go back and bring her here." She was so much a part of our dreams that we choked up. Jim finished the plumbing, and I had to lean on Dawn. I asked her to call Valley View and find out what happened. I needed to know when. She found out precisely when; it was the exact day we moved in, during the sunset. Grace was out in those gardens sitting with those flowers as she died a natural death. That same hour we moved in, as we were moving into Stonebridge, she was moving out of the world.

There's more to it. I'm an academic. I know you're supposed to have scientific research and evidence to prove things, but I'm also human and I could say that some things cannot be proven and that we need to sometimes just embrace the role of the mysterious. The day that Grace passed was a date that we clearly remembered, but we hadn't known she had passed because Dawn and I had moved in that day. That very, very hot day, we had just an hour to get the U-Haul back to State College, but we were really spent. We were so tired. I said, Dawn, it's going to cost us another \$75. "I don't have it in me," she said. I suggested that we just sit down and watch the sunset, and it was gorgeous. There were colors in wisps and wings in the sky. We just sat in silence. The next day when we brought the truck back to U-Haul, the gentleman must have smelled something sweet in our fragrance, and he said, "No charge, ladies."

A month later, we would find out that Grace passed during that sunset on that same day when we decided to watch the clouds. The day of the memorial service, we got a knock at the door. "Hi. I know you don't know me, but I'm Judy Berman. I'm Grace Straley's niece and executor of her will." All I could do was reach for her with a hug and ask her in. She said that she hadn't seen her aunt's house in a long time. She said, "You know my aunt Grace was cremated. Are you coming to the service today, by chance? We'd love for you to come." I said, "As a matter of fact, we are planning to attend." Judy said that she knew it may seem very odd, but her aunt had asked in her will if her ashes could be spread at the house. I said, "I know. I know that that's what she wanted—what she had wished for."

The day that we learned that she had passed, I told my mother. I also told Dawn. I said, "She's coming back here to the house. We'll bring the group out, and they'll spread the ashes of Grace out in the backyard." What was most amazing was that the day of Grace's memorial service, members of her family would come up to me and say, "Wow. You're a lot like Franny, although your name is Grace." They would say, "This is kind of bizarre that the two of you sound like Grace and Franny." We seemed to embody these freakish, familial fascinations. People would take pictures out of their wallets to compare and give them to us. Suddenly, we figured that strange alignments must've been happening in the universe. People that might not have embraced their love, now could accept it through us. People that might have pushed them away now could have redemption released into the universe through us. Just as they pioneered the trail for us, we could pioneer a transcendence for them. It was awesome, and there we were just going from moment to moment. Dawn and I have a picture of ourselves going down the Grand Canyon on horses. We now have a picture of Grace and Franny going down the Grand Canyon on horses. Dawn and I vacation in Cape Cod most summers. Grace and Franny vacationed in Cape Cod most summers too—probably Provincetown for all four of us!

Since then, the neighborhood has welcomed us, not because it was easy but because Grace and Franny made it easy. They pioneered a trail for us. People in the Valley expect there to be two women living in this house and occupying the space; it's the way it should be. My challenge for you is to ask yourself what kind of trail you will pioneer for somebody so that you make it easier for them.

We still didn't know what the neighborhood was. Stop sign to stop sign, it's all pastures. Somebody had explained what the neighborhood was and that the neighbors were having what's called a gathering, or a big picnic. We had no idea what to bring or how to dress. We made a few local dishes, wore casual clothes, and headed to the gathering across the street. I sat sheepishly on my bale of hay. I'm Italian. I'm from Philadelphia. I felt very awkward. One of our Mennonite neighbors brought out his guitar and, as he began to sing, he said, "These are songs that everybody should know." Everybody started to sing them, and I had no idea what the songs were. Maybe it's because I have a Catholic

background. In Catholic masses, they don't really sing Protestant songs. So, there I was, feeling very awkward. I started to lip sync to hide my embarrassment once again; it was sort of like Milli Vanilli.

In the awkwardness of the gathering, the only thing I wanted to do was to compliment. "Oh, I loved your basket of bread. Oh, this is a wonderful garden salad." Then I realized that in the Valley, you don't compliment. What's worse is that you can't complain either. My Italian blood just started to boil backwards. No compliments. No complaints. Where was I? What was I doing there? All I could do was trust the process.

One part of the story that has to be shared is when I caught myself stereotyping "them." I was trying to fit in, trying to be uniform, trying to be a good neighbor. I was nervous and anxious. Well, the men were sitting on one side, and women were sitting on the other side. The kids were somewhere else. We were scattered at this gathering. They were doing the prayer thing, the food thing. I was sitting there thinking, "Where on Earth am I, and what did I get myself into?" Just then, Israel tapped me on the shoulder and introduced himself: "Hi, I'm your neighbor to the left of you, on the hill." I said, "It's nice to meet you." Indicating Dawn, he said, "Is this your sister?" And I said to myself, "Oh no, what do I do? What do I say?" I blushed a little bit. I was so awkward; I was even wearing a dress. I looked at him, and I said, "Israel, we're close enough to be sisters." He looked at me with these beautiful, piercing eyes, and he said, "Oh, so this is the one you favor." All the inner noise hushed. My heart paused.

The moment was transcendent, and I felt redeemed. All that crap got fertilized in one simple, beautiful poetic line: "The one I favor." How beautiful. How polite. And I thought, "Oh my gosh. Wait till I tell Dawn what he just said to me."

Soon after somebody said, "The two of you sit right here." They centered us in the middle of the outdoor gathering and started bringing bags to our feet. I thought, "What on earth is this?" There were paper bags filled with cleanser and towels and dish rags and canned goods. This "gathering" was actually our welcoming to the neighborhood. Now, I'm from Philadelphia. They don't do stuff like that. I had no idea that welcoming gatherings even existed. With redemption and transcendence underfoot, we were left awestruck. The stars had aligned.

Since being called to this home, we've known the need to share it. Every year, we host about six student-centered events. Some of you have been there. Like Grace and Franny built the stone bridge to the home that would sanctify their love, Dawn and I built the stone sanctuary. During that time when Dawn and I wanted to marry, especially when churches said they wouldn't welcome us, we said, "Well, if you can't go to the church, we'll bring the church to us." Through the assistance of a very near and dear friend who was reared Amish, we built a little sanctuary of stones that were indigenous to our property.



Figure 2. Dawn Hayes (left) and Grace Fala (right).³

We never could imagine ourselves living among the Amish, yet look where we are. The message to you is to dream and to hope. Breathe in these wishes. Plant them. It's not tomorrow when they will wake up; it might be a decade or two later, or it might just be tomorrow. Every time we cross each other's path, something sacred, something awesome, some kind of serendipity can spark between us. You are in the presence of *Eros* if you're in the presence of your own self and if your focus is not on being distracted but on being attracted and attracting.

I figured that my job was simply to tell the story. Sometimes you're given a story, and you've got to tell it. We're all given a story, at least one, that we've got to tell. When I was your age, I could not imagine living in an actual home. It wasn't possible. We just thought to survive. If you lived together, it was in an apartment somewhere because you were two women. But you've got to dream, you have to dream big, and sometimes the universe will make your dreams even bigger than you could ever even imagine. That's serendipity. That's blessing. That's beauty. That's wonder. That's a gift of yourself coming alive as a microcosm of the macrocosm.

Juniata College students, what happens when you're trying to write a book and you want to publicly proclaim that you're queer and you live in an Amish valley? Let me tell you, it's not easy. I don't have a Facebook account and know why. I lived through a war zone of discrimination and probably have a little bit of post trauma. I worry about Dawn, too. Dawn's not worried at all, thankfully. I still ask myself, "Well, how are the neighbors going to respond after you make your story public?" It's one thing when you live in the house, like Grace and Franny's Boston marriage, because the Amish don't really express too much affection; it's not a very affectionate culture.

What happens now if the book is out there? The local shops, the dry good stores, are not going to carry the book although I would love for them to do so. I will dedicate a copy to the historical societies in the Valley if they choose to embrace it. Because I use the words “queer” and “lesbian” in the book, it can have a rippling effect. So, while the book is twenty years in the making, there were many considerations about publishing it and making it permanent. After I really grappled with that, it was you, the students, who changed my mind because you came to a student-centered event in our home and you were brave and bold and intrigued and engaged in the story. You were invested in the energy of the house. One day after you left, I said, “Dawn, I’m publishing that book. I’m doing it for our students.”

Some things happened as we were publishing. They changed checking coordinators midway through the process, and I had to worry about how Grace and Franny’s families would respond. What the publishers required me to do was to get written permission from every person whose first and last names were used in the book. I didn’t want to change anything to deviate from the truth. I tried to remain as close to what had happened in the most exact way possible, so I had to get a handwritten release from everybody.



Figure 3. Frances Barnes (center) and Grace Straley (right) in a photo taken in Hawaii.⁴

So, thank you, Juniata. I am truly thankful. Each chapter begins with a poem from Franny, the writer. Grace’s art is in the book, and the work of Dawn, the artist, is in the book. It all adds to the intrigue. The following paragraphs are excerpted from the book:

Grace Viola Straley and Frances Martha Barnes knew and loved each other for over 60 years. They met during an era when seven counties in Pennsylvania integrated to form a "state normal school" for young women, mostly to study education. Later known as the State Teacher's College at Shippensburg, it is now Shippensburg University. Grace and Fran had just begun their brave professional journeys when they met.

Frances would later earn a bachelor's degree from the University of Pennsylvania and a master's degree from Northwestern University in Illinois. She was a teacher for thirty-five years. After instructing music at Manoa Elementary School, she taught English primary to ninth-grade music classes at Haverford Township Junior High School located in Havertown, near Philadelphia. During her sojourn at Haverford, she also advised a popular, award-winning junior high school newspaper named *The Tattler*.

After retiring, Fran and Grace moved to the house they hatched and dared to dream together from the mortar to the "Stonebridge." There, Fran could meld her talent for the pen with her passion for bird watching. Here, Fran wrote articles for the local newspaper inviting readers to "*Meet My Feathered Friends*" that later became a compilation of writings detailing the flight and fancy of winged visitors. More of Fran's newspaper articles on nature are grouped together in *Have You Seen?* While Fran was engaging in pen with paper, Grace would have been blending brush with paint. Or she was gardening.

Grace was an elementary school teacher for just as long. With a bachelor's degree from Penn State University and a master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania, she taught a variety of grade levels in the Lansdale school district, also a suburb of Philadelphia. While sharing professions as creative, dynamic educators, Grace and Fran lived together in the Haverford area of Pennsylvania. Sometime before retiring, they designed the Cape Cod that they would someday build. They apparently fancied and fussed through every detail. Then they secured a prominent Philadelphia architect, Charles Okie, to draft the blueprints. The house was built to their specifications between 1962 and 1964.

Poetry, reading, music, and gardening were enjoyed by both residents and made Grace and Fran connoisseurs of conversation. Frances was known to be refined, dignified, and proper, as though she was teaching most of the time. She delighted in the recitation of poetry and often shared her writings with neighbors and friends. She had a warm and magnanimous personality. Townspeople often talk about how charismatic she was. And how she loved to cook and sing! Grace, who especially enjoyed Fran's culinary skills, was more down to earth and outdoorsy. Thinning the soles of rugged boots, Grace routinely gardened the nature trails and flowers in the back arboretum with poised persistence. She was also known for her ability to build things,

design new things, and draw almost anything. When necessary, Grace could be stern, yet witty. She also had a playful knack for storytelling, reminding listeners to "obey your instincts if they're right."

As they were getting ready to retire and as the house was being built, Grace and Fran spent their summers in the valley studying stonework. They specifically set out to break new ground by building the stone bridge that Dawn and I crossed the first day of our journey and have been crossing ever since. As Fran washed each boulder, Grace strategically cemented it into place. Impressed by this, we had to ask Grace about how she was able to engineer the hydraulics. She rumbled and smiled mischievously and winked: "We made it up as we went along." Grace and Fran were in their sixties when they built that bridge. By 1966, they were both retired and ready to move into Stonebridge, where they lived for close to 30 years before moving to Valley View Retirement Community.



Figure 4. Frances Barnes (left) and Grace Straley (right).⁵

Adults today remember days of their youth with Grace and Fran. In Big Valley style, folks prioritize the gardens first, the poetry second and, last but not least, the stories and games.

They describe the attic upstairs as once being filled with pastime diversions and teachers' supplies. There were books everywhere too. To accentuate casual walks through the gardens, Grace or Fran would entertain their guests with the Latin names of indigenous trees and birds. They would invite friends to share a hearty recitation of poems or a good board game. Children then remember clearly as adults now.

Apparently, Grace and Fran made a beautiful difference just by being themselves. They lived the nature, art, poetry paradox in play that they loved. Now they remain in the sweet fragrance of wild flowers.⁶

NOTES

1. Grace M. Fala, *We Built the Bridge* (Bloomington, IN: Archway Publishing, 2019). All images from this book were reprinted by the permission of the author and the publisher.
2. Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1981).
3. Fala, *We Built the Bridge*, p. 132.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 120-122.