

The Raging Grannies

Activist Grandmothering for Peace

The Raging Grannies are a familiar sight in the North American peace and social justice movement. With flowered hats, off-key singing and a satiric take on the image of grandmothers, the Grannies challenge stereotypes of older women through creative and humorous political action. Drawing on interviews and fieldwork in Ottawa, Victoria and San Francisco, this article examines how the Raging Grannies act as older and wiser—but still proudly subversive—members of the North American peace movement. While the work of the Raging Grannies has been colourfully described in Roy (2004, 2005) and Acker and Brightwell (2004), among others, this article focuses primarily on the Grannies' relationship to young people. I argue that the Raging Grannies apply Ruddick's (1989) principles of maternal thinking—preservative love, fostering growth, and training—to their peace activism. I first describe how the Grannies practice the value of protection or preservation by offering themselves for military service in place of young people; second, how they nurture young activists in the peace movement; and third, how they engage in training children through peace education. It is these three components, combined with a commitment to nonviolence, that make up their practice of activist grandmothering for peace.

The Raging Grannies are a familiar sight in the North American peace and social justice movement. With flowered hats, off-key singing and a satiric take on the image of grandmothers, the Grannies challenge stereotypes of older women through creative and humorous political action while drawing links between poverty, militarism, war, and the destruction of the environment. While the peace activism of the Raging Grannies has been colourfully described in Carole Roy (2004, 2005), Alison Acker and Betty Brightwell, and Judy Rohrer, among others, this article focuses on the Grannies' relationship to young people,¹ how they understand their roles as the older and wiser

“grandmothers” of the North American peace movement, and in particular how they apply the principles of maternal thinking to their practice of *activist grandmothering for peace*.

In her important book *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, Sara Ruddick outlines a philosophical perspective of “maternal thinking” based on the three values of protection, nurturance and training (1989: 23). As Ruddick notes (1989), “mothering” is a form of care work that can be conducted by any person, woman or man, biological parent or not, and maternal thinking arises out of the activity of mothering. I apply Ruddick’s definition also to the activity of grandmothering, which, although one step removed from mothering, often involves caring for children.

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Research Methodology

Research was conducted with three “gaggles”² of Raging Grannies in 2007 and 2008. Principles of feminist research and participatory research methodology were used during field work, which included in-depth semi-structured interviews with more than a dozen Raging Grannies in Ottawa, Victoria and San Francisco, as well as participant observation at numerous events in Ottawa and Victoria such as marches, demonstrations, and organizing meetings. Grannies were provided with transcripts of each interview and invited to comment; in Ottawa, the gaggle was consulted on the research-design process. Further material comes from email exchanges, newsletters and several online Raging Granny websites, as well as newspaper coverage.

Origins of the Raging Grannies

A network of older women activists, the Raging Grannies were formed in Victoria, British Columbia in the 1980s by a group of activist women frustrated with the ageism and sexism they experienced within the peace movement. Like the peace activists at Greenham Common or the many women peace activists in the United States in the 1980s (see Harwood), the Raging Grannies were initially concerned with the threat of nuclear weapons. As founding members Acker and Brightwell noted, “Never mind philosophies; the issue that first brought us together was fear of annihilation” (3). Their goals included being rabble-rousers, inspiring older women to become activists, using satiric songs

to deliver their political messages, being independent of other groups and supporting each other as older women. Grannies also promised “to adopt Canadian author Margaret Laurence’s prescription: ‘As we grow older we should become not less radical but more so’” (Acker and Brightwell 4).

The words “Raging” and “Granny,” which would seem to be incompatible with each other, highlight the peculiarity of a group of “outrageous” older women activists who do not conform to traditional stereotypes of the apolitical grandmother usually absent from any serious discussion of peace and security. Roy has called the name “Raging Grannies” a “jarring and unusual juxtaposition” (2004: 16). Their use of humour and satiric songs is designed to capture the public’s attention; as Granny Shannon Lee Mannion says, “we disarm with charm.” Warren Magnusson has noted that the Raging Grannies “turn their identity, usually a liability, into a resource” (qtd. in Roy 2005: 14).

While not all Raging Grannies are grandmothers or indeed mothers, their satiric take on the image of grandmothers—most obvious in their choice of colourful outfits with big flowered hats and Granny shawls—conducts their activism, in the words of Granny Fran Thoburn, for “the grandchildren of the world.” Posey Daniel of Edmonton, Alberta says she attributes her radical activism to the fact that her children are *not* politically active: “I feel I must make up for their lack of being involved. Grandmother, more than Mother means I must take responsibility to create a better future for coming generations and set a good example for them while doing so” (qtd. in Fortune). Pat Birnie of Tucson, Arizona, says it is for her children “and their children ... my grandchildren (and others’ grandchildren) that I spend so many hours being an activist” (qtd. in Fortune).

Protecting Young People from Harm

Raging Grannies have long argued that war is not only damaging to those threatened by violence, but also to those who participate in it. Unlike some other anti-militarist groups, the Raging Grannies take a view that those serving in the military are not the cause of the problem—but those enlisting need to be saved from the dangers of deployment. Thus at the start of the first Persian Gulf War in 1990, the Victoria Grannies descended on a local military recruitment centre to enlist in the Canadian Armed Forces. Granny Betty Brightwell told a recruiter “that she was experienced in conflict resolution, having brought up two children and been married for over 40 years,” while Granny Jean McLaren argued “they need some wisdom in the Middle East. Maybe if the Grannies went over there they would talk to us... It would be a tragedy for Canada’s youth to be sacrificed for the oil companies” (Acker and Brightwell 65). Granny Mary told the Victoria *Times Colonist* that “while some may interpret their enlistment attempts as a joke, the Grannies have a serious point to make ... to get the message across that it’s unnecessary to risk our boys’ lives for oil.... We haven’t learned anything in 45 years” (qtd. in Acker and Brightwell 64).

The recruiters, barred by law from asking the recruits their age, apparently tolerated this invasion with good humour. The Grannies, armed with their knitting needles, returned a week later to take over the recruitment centre for a second time, and proceeded to stage the first known “Knit-In” where they knit scarves for Canadian troops stationed abroad (Roy 2004).

The recruitment centre visit inspired other gaggles to hold “Knit-Ins for Peace” and attempt enlistment across Canada and the United States. Since 2001, gaggles of Raging Grannies have increased their presence at recruitment centres across North America. In California, Raging Grannies have stood outside their local Army Career Center wearing placards reading “Career Counselor” and pasting signs to the Center windows declaring “Killing is NOT a Career” (Raging Grannies Action League). One 91-year-old Granny told the *Palo Alto Daily News* that 18-year-old recruits “are still kids” and should not be able to enlist without their parents’ permission (qtd. in Carroll). In addition to their concerns that many young people are forced into military service because of financial challenges, the San Francisco gaggle cites false promises, coercion of potential recruits, increasing levels of post-traumatic stress disorder in returning troops and scandals, such as at the Walter Reed Veterans’ Hospital, as reasons to oppose military recruitment. Concerned with the recruitment of children in high schools, two Grannies wrote to the *Oakland Tribune* in June 2008 to explain that “during the school year, recruiters are a heavy presence on campus, with games, small gifts and other inducements, military aptitude tests and a database that includes information on children as young as 16” (qtd. in Kufeldt and Sredanovic).

The military recruitment centre actions are designed both to disrupt recruitment activity and waste recruiters’ time—a clever protest tactic Gene Sharp calls “fraternization” (146). At the same time, the actions are often framed as sacrificial attempts to take the place of “our boys” and save them from military service. This concern about the sacrifice of their country’s youth in war also leads many of the Grannies to support those who choose to leave military service. “They’re being tricked and abused,” said one San Francisco Granny. Another spoke of friends at military bases who are putting “runaway slaves” on trains up to Canada, as part of what she calls “the peace movement’s Underground Railroad.” “We’re helping to free the slaves,” the Granny said, “because military service is slavery!” (Peninsula Raging Granny Action League). Along with much of the rest of the anti-war movement, Raging Grannies across North America are increasingly speaking out in favour of the war resisters leaving service in the United States and seeking refugee status in Canada. Grannies in Ottawa, for example, march alongside American veterans of the Iraq war and attend events in support of their refugee claims.

The notion of sacrifice also becomes apparent when we turn to the Raging Grannies’ attitudes on civil disobedience and the threat of arrest. Like other activists, Grannies regularly weigh the consequences of engaging in civil disobedience and face tough decisions about what tactics they are willing to

employ in particular demonstrations. Many younger activists, especially in the post-9/11 security environment, are concerned that an arrest record could lead to travel restrictions or limit their employment opportunities. Several Grannies have expressed that they would be willing to risk arrest and accept travel restrictions because they are now too old to travel, and would rather be arrested than to see a younger activist go through that process. As Granny Pat Birnie says, “We need to take that risk, and we who are older have less to lose by way of this route” (qtd. in Fortune). The willingness to sacrifice on behalf of the younger activists is similar to their willingness to volunteer as military recruits; while military service and being arrested for civil disobedience are two very different levels of sacrifice—and indeed reflect two very different approaches to patriotism and civic responsibility—the threat of arrest is a reality for many. Several Raging Grannies were arrested outside a military recruitment centre in Tucson, Arizona in 2005 after an attempt to enlist in the Army. In 2007 two Ottawa Grannies spent time in jail following a climate change demonstration, and Granny Sharon Kufeldt—a Vietnam veteran and national vice-president of Veterans for Peace—was arrested during an anti-war demonstration in San Francisco in 2008.

Still, while arrests do happen, many Grannies acknowledge that their costume and persona sometimes affords them protection from arrest; unlike younger protesters, grandmothers are seen to pose little threat to public safety. “We’re safe,” one Granny told me. Says Granny Rosalie Reynolds of Ottawa, in reference to the police:

I think we can do things, simply because these young guys—and they are usually young guys—with their tasers and all the rest, they’re not supposed to hit old ladies. They know that. I mean, hit an old man or a teenage kid, that’s okay. Just don’t hit old ladies! So I think it gives us great leverage.

The manipulation of their identities as grandmothers allows the Grannies to enter spaces that younger activists cannot without fear of reprisal, thus taking advantage of the intriguing paradox of being both highly respected and depoliticized members of society. By trying to sign themselves up for military service in the place of young people, and offering to be the first over the barricades at a protest in order to save young activists from arrest, they are engaging in performative sacrifice designed to protect children from harm—while doing something outrageous and entirely unexpected of a grandmother.

Fostering Growth

“...to nurture a child’s developing spirit.” (Ruddick, 1989: 82)

The second value of maternal thinking—nurturing or fostering growth of young people—is accomplished by extending the activity of grandmothering

into the peace movement, acting as moral educators and surrogate grandparents to younger activists. Raging Grannies often have very positive relationships with young activists. The interplay between the Grannies and their younger counterparts—sometimes faced with a 70-year difference in age—is a unique aspect of their activism. Young women activists approach the Grannies for hugs or a chat in the middle of a demonstration. Ria Heynen refers to younger activists as “our grandchildren;” as Ottawa Granny Jo Wood says,

the young activists love us, absolutely. We have such a close bond with the younger people. If nothing else, that's the good part, we're role models. We don't have to shut up. It lends respectability—it's respectable to be an activist.

Granny Pat Howard recalled a time when a young male activist approached her during a demonstration against French nuclear testing in the Pacific:

As we were coming off (Parliament) Hill, we were approached by this young man, who might have been eighteen. And he said, “Oh, I so admire you Grannies. I watch you up there, and you're so great,” and he said, “you know, I see you, and I'm not afraid to grow old!”

Moments of solidarity with younger members of the peace movement are sometimes held up in the group as proof of the value of their work. The Grannies' showdown with police at The Wall in Quebec City in 2001—a tense moment where several Grannies stepped forward to prevent the police from firing tear gas on the younger protesters—is often cited by the Ottawa gaggle as proof that they make a difference. After 78-year-old Granny Alma Norman and others went to the wall and sang to the police, many young activists came up to the group to say “thank you, thank you, thank you so much, thank you for being with us, thank you for coming, thank you for supporting us... It was a tremendous moment of solidarity” (qtd. in Roy, 2004: 122). Peggy Land remembers that, at Quebec City,

there were young activists running along beside us, saying “I don't have a Granny! Will you be my Granny?” (laughs) It is great! Because you realise we're actually being of some comfort to them.... It is (important), being the seniors of the peace movement. You know, it's a very limited role, but I think many would say that the protests and events are that much richer.... (It's a reminder) that peace isn't just the notion of a young person. And that not all older people become conservative as they get older, which I think is in many ways a myth.

While the presence of the Raging Grannies is a source of inspiration to younger activists, the Grannies also draw much of their energy from being in a

crowd with many young people. The positive reinforcement from the younger activists gives them a sense that their activism does make a difference and that they are effecting positive change. Especially for younger women, the presence of the Grannies can be a positive example of older women remaining relevant in the political landscape; I have heard several young women activists declare “I want to be a Raging Granny when I grow up!”

In addition to the inspiration they provide to younger activists, Raging Grannies frequently step in to quell tense moments in demonstrations. I have watched Raging Grannies take over the megaphone during a heated demonstration to calm the crowd and remind activists that the police were not their target. At the anti-SPP (Security and Prosperity Partnership) demonstration in Montebello, Quebec in 2007, Grannies were asked by organizers to lead some protesters towards the family-friendly “Green Zone” when the time came for more confrontational tactics.

Despite the perception by outsiders that the Raging Grannies are a “benign peace group”,³ it is clear that their presence has a unique impact on younger protesters. The Grannies’ emphasis on positive change, their independence, their commitment to remaining vocal and visible, to tell their stories and refuse to be silent, is a source of inspiration to younger people—especially women—who may not have positive role models of active older women. Their subversive attitude presents a real challenge to stereotypes about older women becoming less political and more conservative as they age.

Training

Training or educating children is the third value of maternal thinking evidenced in the Raging Grannies’ activism. Grannies regularly organize events with a specific focus on educating children, parents and grandparents on issues of peace and war. Some gaggles have been invited to speak about their activism and sing protest songs at high schools and university classes. Gaggles also aim to reach parents and children at special times of the year such as the Christmas shopping season and Grandparents’ Day. One such event held annually by many gaggles of Grannies is the campaign against War Toys. Alarmed by the popularity of violent toys and video games, a gaggle will choose a local shopping mall during the Christmas shopping season and descend *en masse*, singing anti-war toy lyrics to popular Christmas carols. At their 2007 War Toys event, the Ottawa Grannies compiled a list of nonviolent video games and distributed it to parents. Lyrics to popular Christmas songs were changed to reflect the nonviolent message:

You’d better watch out, Santa, old chap
 For video games you’ll get a bad rap
 Lots of them are vicious, you know.
 In video games, war’s a big thrill

And playing them well is learning to kill

Is THAT a skill that your kids should know?
(Ottawa Raging Grannies 2007a)

Another song, to the tune of “Frosty the Snowman,” appealed to parents to consider the messages their children were receiving:

We’re the Raging Grannies
And we’re asking you today
PLEASE don’t buy destructive toys
For the kids on Christmas day!
What kind of message
Are we giving to our kids?
When WE buy guns and destructive toys—
Think what the message is.
When we buy tanks and bombers
That they see on T.V.
We’re giving them the message we
Should prepare for World War 3!
(Ottawa Raging Grannies 2007b)

On Grandparents’ Day in 2007, Raging Grannies in Victoria rented a horse drawn carriage and invited grandparents to take their grandchildren on free rides. Lyrics of Granny songs opposing violent toys were distributed as the grandparents and children were encouraged to sing along. A flyer titled “Say Neigh to War!” suggested small ways grandparents could transform their speech and behaviours to teach nonviolence and “build a Peaceful World”:

- Choose toys and games that don’t involve violence or war.
 - Watch peaceful T.V. shows and movies with your grandchildren
 - Pick your words carefully: Don’t “wage war” on weeds, or “fight” for a parking spot.
 - Be a model of compromise and calm in your day-to-day activities.
 - Play games that call for cooperation and helpfulness.
 - Make it clear that name calling and bullying carry consequences.
 - Discuss ways to solve problems peacefully.
 - Take grandchildren to Remembrance Day services and Hiroshima memorials, explaining why it is important today that we use words, not weapons.
 - Curb your road rage.
 - Talk tolerance and walk diversity. Introduce your grandchildren to people of different cultures, religions and income brackets.
- (Victoria Raging Grannies)

Like many women peace activists, the Grannies make connections between war and culture (Ruddick, 2001), recognizing that although conflict is inevitable there are ways to resolve and transform it without turning to violence. Their focus is on moral citizenship, raising socially aware children capable of making good choices, who are open to difference and able to resolve conflicts in positive ways. Clearly, their personae as raging grandmothers allow them to extend beyond the private sphere, as they become the public face of grandparents who are both political activists and moral educators. Every action becomes an opportunity to educate and put into practice the ideals of nonviolence.

Conclusion

James Jasper notes that “certain social movements aim at changing the broader culture of their society, including the acceptability and display of certain emotions” (Jasper 407). The activity of “grannyng” builds a sense of community among women who feel marginalized and angry about the issues (Roy 2005). One Granny proclaims that being a Raging Granny is “good therapy!” (Reynolds). The Raging Grannies’ approach challenges perceptions of older women as apolitical and calls into question how we think about grandmothers in society—and how these women think about themselves. As Acker and Brightwell state at the very beginning of their memoir, “Once we were invisible. Like all older women, we were expected to fade into the background along with our looks, our health, our income and our importance to society. But not any more” (2004: xi). Their actions create new political space for older women in North America. This space offers them an opportunity to teach many people—military recruits, anti-war activists, parents, children—about alternative ways of thinking about war and peace, and alternative ways of *practising* peace in their daily lives.

Ruddick understands parenting a child to include “keeping her safe, nourishing her spirit, (and) training her in the ways of the world” (2001: 11). I have argued here that the Raging Grannies apply these three principles of maternal thinking to the practice of activist grandmothering, redefining what it is to be a grandmother acting for peace and showing how grannyng can occur in the public sphere as easily as the private. By working to save young people from military service through performative sacrifice, or moving ahead of young activists when faced with a police line, Raging Grannies try to keep young people from harm. By acting as role models to young activists, offering guidance and distilling conflict in demonstrations, they nourish their spirits. Finally, by organizing events focused on peace education, they encourage children and their parents to practise nonviolence every day. Whether or not individual Grannies have grandchildren, their experience as an activist group not only creates new political space for older women activists, but also aims to

protect, nurture and educate as many young people as possible, thereby making positive steps towards building a culture of peace.

¹I use here the Grannies' understanding of "children," which often includes young people who may legally be adults, such as those old enough to vote or serve in the military.

²A collective of Raging Grannies is known as a "gaggle."

³On October 30, 2009, I heard a reporter on CBC Radio British Columbia refer to the Raging Grannies as "Victoria's benign peace group."

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