

# **Pesky Raging Grannies** ***Speaking Truth to Power*** ***with Wisdom, Humour and*** ***Spunky Actions***

*While little is written about older women's activism, this article seeks to acknowledge the Raging Grannies, a group of mostly older women and grandmothers who have been active in social and political protests since they started in Victoria, British Columbia, in 1987. Their example has inspired other women; there are now more than 70 groups of Raging Grannies keeping an eye on things and speaking up across Canada and in the United States, England, Australia, Greece, Japan, and Israel. These activist grannies have developed a unique approach to social and political protests. After doing research on a broad range of issues, they use creativity and humour in songs and actions aimed at creating greater awareness among the public, media and authorities alike. Their ability to turn difficult issues into accessible songs may be related to the skills necessary in the work of caring for their families.*

*The Raging Grannies offer a positive example of transforming rage and despair into creative activism to communicate their concerns for social and ecological justice. In the process they also challenge stereotypes of older women and aging. This article focuses on their distinctive approach, records some of the songs they have created and actions they have engaged in for justice and for the sake of future generations.*

What we grandmothers are doing with our lives, the problems we face now, the present true state of our relationships, the issues which we might raise as important—our priorities—are not considered interesting. These are never the subject of poems or political analysis by younger women. If they do break this rule, they are often punished by a rebuff from publishers who believe that “old ladies don’t sell” (Copper, 1988: 11).

“Grandmothers’ Squawk”

Tune: Grandfather’s Clock. (*Granny Grapevine*, 1996a)

*The Raging Grannies squawk / And do much more than talk  
‘Cause there’s so much work to be done  
There’s the question of peace / While weapon sales increase  
And foreign aid keeps going down  
Our leaders of course / Show no shame or remorse  
Supporting the slaughter called war  
So we’ll bitch, rage, and roar even more  
Till we change our country’s course  
They say hi-tech war / Is good for trade  
But notice how craftily / They chop and they slash  
From our social economy ...  
Hungry kids are a bloody shame ...  
Come one, let’s all rock / The ship of state  
Together we can channel our rage  
To change the way / The poor always pay  
Politicians increase their own wage  
They must clean up their act / Or we’ll give them all the sack  
We must be very much on our guard  
While we bitch, rage, and roar even more*

Since 1987, a group of mostly older women calling themselves the Raging Grannies has attracted a lot of attention with their creative approach to protest. Started in Victoria, British Columbia, they never expected that eighteen years later more than seventy groups of Raging Grannies across Canada and abroad would still be raising a little hell for authorities, trailing various Premiers, Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin, or US President George Bush with biting satirical lyrics and spunky actions. The United States, England, Australia, Greece, Japan, and Israel all have active groups of Raging Grannies keeping an eye on things. Protecting what they can of the world for the next generations was, and still is, at the root of Raging Grannies’ motivation to take action: “Our most valuable possession all over the world is our children, we’ve got to make the world a better place for them,” said Granny Shirley Morrison at the 1999 Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization (*Granny Grapevine*, 2000: 6). Playfully identifying with an “un-motherly” public rage, the Raging Grannies provide a dynamic example of political engagement and reveal that “citizenship can grow out of conscious motherhood” (Kaplan, 1997: 40). This article examines the Raging Grannies’ unique and imaginative approach to protest using humour in songs and actions as well as some of the impact these activist grandmothers have had on stereotypes of aging.

From the first action the elements of their distinctive form of protest were

present. Having written letters, contacted MPs, filled petitions, marched in protests for many years, and experienced sexism and ageism in the peace movement, a group of mostly older women decided to experiment with street theatre. Their initial goal was to communicate their sense of urgency more directly and creatively, and raise awareness of the visits of American nuclear warships and submarines in the waters surrounding Victoria, which created a potential threat to the environment and to the health of people. On Valentine's Day 1987, the first group called the Raging Grannies offered a huge broken heart to their Member of Parliament, chairman of the defence committee at the time, for his lack of action on the nuclear issue ("Taxpaying heart not in MP's broken Valentine," 1987: A3). Dressed as proper old ladies, they also carried a ratty umbrella full of holes to convey the stupidity of sheltering under the nuclear umbrella and sang a satirical song to the tune of a lullaby to communicate their message. While the range of issues tackled by Raging Grannies has expanded widely beyond the nuclear issue, colourful costumes, imaginative props, dramatic actions, and satirical songs have come to define the Raging Grannies style. Grannies realized they had "to be seen to be heard" (Kaplan, 1997): "Older women are completely transparent and invisible. You can stand there for hours and you're not there," said Granny Joan Harvey (2002). With disarming smiles, gaudy shawls, outlandish hats, and flat sensible shoes they defy the invisibility many older women experience, divest themselves of an "artificial notion of decorum and dignity" by making fools of themselves, and challenge the stereotype of the feeble granny "who shuffles onto a TV ad looking for Geritol" (Walker, 1998). Grey hairs does not mean meekness: "The Raging Grannies have proven that it's not only wisdom that comes with age—humour, courage and outrage do too" (Quon, 2001: 12).

The Raging Grannies' vocabulary of tactics is broad and imaginative. With bonnets and banners, Victoria Grannies held a tea party on the deck of a U.S. warship, only to be unceremoniously evicted by a fuming captain who did not appreciate their humour or their commitment to peace (*Grapevine*, 2000: 10). While the threats that led to the first Gulf War escalated, Victoria Grannies who are World War II veterans resurrected old uniforms while others made new ones from baubles and shiny things. Dressed in these uniforms, they then showed up at the Armed Forces Recruitment Centre to volunteer for a tour of duty in the Gulf and spare young lives. Taken by surprise, and unable to discriminate on the basis of age, the officer had to work through the paperwork, providing an eye-catching photograph for the first page of the local newspaper the next day! ("Raging Grannies ready for war," 1990: A1)

The Montreal Raging Grannies, concerned about Atomic Energy of Canada Limited (AECL)'s plan to bury highly radioactive nuclear waste in the Canadian Shield, crashed the Federal Environment Assessment Review hearing of AECL's plan and offered their own alternative recipe for radioactive disposal, the Radioactive Road Resurfacing recipe:

Take a pinch of plutonium (holding your breath because 1 microgram will give you lung cancer).  
Add half a cup of strontium (fast before the cup melts).  
Mix well and spread evenly on road surface.

The formula, which only needs to be applied once a millennium ... comes with the following guarantee: It will glow in the dark and is self defrosting for at least 1,000 years. ("Raging Grannies propose solution for nuclear waste," 1990: 1-2)

Ottawa Raging Grannies take advantage of the special opportunities that come from living in a city that is the seat of the federal government. When the Department of Defence declared a search for the missing papers during the Somalia affair, the Ottawa Grannies were only too happy to contribute their skills and offer their help to search for the missing papers. Armed with songs and magnifying glasses, they chased the personnel on their way to work, "endlessly scrutinizing briefcases and pawing earnestly through waste containers" (*Granny Grapevine*, 1996b: 4).

Many Grannies went to Quebec City to protest the Free Trade Area of the Americas. Granny Linda Slavin went because her planet is under siege, the environment threatened, people hungry and homeless (2001: A4). She adds:

When politicians meet behind barricades to promote the text of a commercial agreement allowing corporations to make money while threatening education, health, social services and nature, I have to be counted ... A few were unnecessarily violent but the state violence in Quebec was far worse: plastic bullets, tear gas, and pepper spray linked the Canadian government to the systemic human rights abuses in many of the countries represented at the summit. Most protesters were determined to confront this insult to democracy creatively. (2001: A4).

"The FTAA Hokey-Pokey"  
Tune: Hockey Pockey. (Seifred Collection)

*They put the rich folks in / They put the poor folks out /  
They put their ideas in  
And they hide them all about / They spin the information  
(chorus) And they twist it all around / That's what it's all about!!!  
They have the corporations in / They have the little guys out /  
The NGO's are nowhere really*

Kathleen Foy, a frail 90-year-old Granny from Montreal, defied the will of her family and went to Quebec City in a wheelchair, in spite of the threat

of tear gas, because she felt the need to stand up for democracy. On the day of the march, a few Grannies left the safety of numbers to go to the “wall” and

came across a group of heavily armed police in full combat gear. The police were unaccountably preventing the peaceful progress of a small group of protesters trying to make their way down a street: “The police looked more like armadillos,” according to the small Granny’s band fearless leader Alma, aged 78. One “amardillo” stepped forward, fingering his rubber-bullet gun. Undeterred, the Granny group linked arms and put themselves between the small group of protesters and the police. First they sang, *Hysteria rules today / When people claim / They have a right to demonstrate / Our leaders in their wisdom hope / To hide away from protest / Behind a ten foot barricade / But really there’s no contest*. Then [they] took small steps towards the police [singing] “We shall overcome,” and a few more steps forward, voices cracking a little.... Alma explained to the police that the Grannies could indeed be their mothers or their grandmothers, but that they were simply there for peaceful purposes and posed no danger. Amazingly, the police then retreated a few steps. (Land, 2001: 2)

On the way back from the wall, young people hugged and thanked Grannies for being there. Raging Grannies easily connect with youth.

A few Raging Grannies have engaged in non-violent civil disobedience. In 1988, Grannies were arrested for protesting U.S. nuclear warships in Canadian waters in an action called Grandmother Peace at the military base in Nanoose Bay, B.C. Another Granny, Alison Acker, a former university professor, was also arrested in 1993 for protesting logging at Clayoquot Sound, B.C.:

We were concerned that the press was making it look like only a load of crazy young kids was protesting about the logging .... It’s not just young people who are concerned about the future of the planet. Us old birds care too. (Birch, 2001: 109)

On February 13, 2000, the day after the Ontario provincial government passed a law making it illegal to squeegee, London (Ontario) Grannies in their 80s took a swipe at the law by squeegeeing at a busy intersection and raising money for the local food bank.

“People have to become more aware of the homeless,” said 86-year-old Florence Boyd-Graham, who blasted the province’s crack-down on squeegee kids and noted that at her age, she doesn’t “give a hell” about what people think of her politics.... Michelle LeBoutillier said the Grannies were “concerned” they might get charged, but were compelled to disobey the law because they “felt so strongly that

poverty isn't being addressed in the way it should be." (Fenlon, 2000: A1)

As Granny Rose DeShaw wrote in the *Globe and Mail*, "Underneath the humour in the songs and costumes there is a nod to the wisdom of older women" (1997: A20). She continues:

Walt Whitman calls it "The divine maternity." He talks about a woman of 80 called "The Peacemaker who was tacitly agreed on as ... a settler of difficulties and a reconciler in the land." That's my granny model. If ever a country needed reconciling, it is Canada at the end of the nineties. Governmental dumbness has spread so fast it could keep an entire platoon of grannies singing our lungs out. Some buffoon wants to turn the 300-year old fort in our town into a casino. Abused women are now allowed to stay only two days in shelters in Ontario. And they're trying to privatize fire departments. (1997: A20)

What is necessary to join this dynamic sorority is "attitude," which means to "take an off-beat angle and find ways to defy authority when necessary," says Granny Phyllis Creighton (2001). "Attitude" means to deeply love without sentimentality, to be compassionate, yet a rock when standing in defence of people, principles, or the earth. It requires integrity and the refusal to allow bureaucracies to dictate, as they tend to atrophy the spirit or fossilize life into meaningless patterns. "Attitude" means to be spontaneous and to act as if the world matters. It is a willingness to engage with others with respect and honesty, and take risks because the stakes are so high.

Caring and interconnectedness are at the heart of why Grannies insist on having their voices heard. Muriel Duckworth, an inspiring 96-year-old Raging Granny and a lifelong peace activist, acknowledges how a sense of connection is central to her motivation: "If you feel your link to all people, that other people matter as much as you do yourself, and you matter a lot, then that link with people makes you do what you can so that other people should have a chance too" (Kerans, 1996: 232). This sense of connection and caring translates into anger, rage, and courage when people are victims of injustice. As Granny Joan Harvey (2002) said, "If people all through history didn't stick their necks out to help other people, where would we be?" In turn, caring is also a source of hope and courage, as Granny Barbara Seifred (2002) explained:

Of course we have to carry on and we have to have hope and we have to work for change and work to give hope to young people, because I think they must be bloody well pissed off, if I may say so, with what we've done with this world ... There's an obligation to not let things just slide into ruins. I don't think you can exaggerate the seriousness of the situation ... in the nuclear weapons age there are no exaggera-

tions. *They* are the exaggeration of power and destruction and horror beyond exaggeration. So it's time to speak up whenever I can and rattle the bars, rattle the cage, practice democracy.... It's our obligation as citizens.

The Raging Grannies' ability to use paradox in the creation of humour comes in part from their work of caring as mothers and grandmothers. Mechthild Hart (1992) suggests that mothering work cannot easily separate the work involved in the care of the body from the work required in the care of the mind. As well, theory must apply to specific individuals and cannot be separated from practical application. This work demands closeness and involvement as the knowledge of a child is never absolute and cannot easily generate general propositions, so the mother must be open to discoveries (Hart, 1992: 187-188). Moving between "critical distance" and "mimetic nearness" and recognizing that both "mutually influence and enhance rather than exclude each other" is at the heart of an epistemology which reflects the importance of equality and reciprocity rather than dominance: "Only such dialectical unity.... can keep the bond between work, knowledge and experience intact" (1992: 183). Engaging with dialectical unity requires a comprehensive as well as differentiating process, which allows for a more complex reality to emerge where both similarities and differences are important. This process requires valuing "thought and emotion, analysis and creativity, process and content, caring and judgement, listening and speaking" (1992: 192-193).

The Raging Grannies reveal their grasp of this dialectical unity by making use of paradoxes effectively when using serious factual information in humorous constructs or by emphasizing caring and anger at the same time, as their name does. The creation of humour requires juxtaposing frames of reference not usually related to each other. Jane R. Prétat (1994), a Jungian analyst, also suggests that old age is a time of metanoia, a time to integrate opposites. This integration can prove dangerous for those who have vested interests in the status quo. Harriet Rosenberg (1995) suggests that housewife activists are especially feared by corporations because they are unwilling to compromise with the health of their families (1995: 198). The work and experience of mothering, the ability of older people to see connections and integrate various aspects, and the unwillingness of housewife activists to compromise converge into the indomitable spirit of the Raging Grannies. Caring gives people "the energy and the commitment to keep at it:" without a sense of connection "you wouldn't put your neck out and you wouldn't put yourself on the line and you wouldn't open yourself" to verbal abuse and ridicule, says Granny Joan Harvey (2002). They link caring and protest and, according to Warren Magnusson, professor of Political Sciences at the University of Victoria, turn their identity, usually a liability, into a resource (1990: 536). Their actions express the belief that "what ordinary people think and do is actually more crucial for the movement's success than what the states do"

Carole Roy

(Magnusson, 1990: 536).

And in the process, they challenge stereotypes of aging and of older women:

“Wrinkle, wrinkle aging star”

Tune: Twinkle Twinkle Little Star. (*Granny Grapevine*, 1995: 4)

*Who cares just how old you are? / Your hair is grey, your dentures click  
Your bosom sags, your ankle's thick /  
Your joints all creak, your arthritis plagues  
You've got all the symptoms of Raging Age ... /  
Hurrah for Age, Age, now's the time to rage ...  
Hurrah for Age, Age, to Hell with being beige /  
We won't stay cooped up in a cage  
Our eyes are dim but our tongues are sharp /  
We go out on a limb, our wits are sharp  
Yes we've got years, years and you'd better get it clear /  
A raging gran's a force to fear*

The Raging Grannies have been introduced as Recycled Teenagers! Their spunky approach makes grannydom exciting for youth: “I hope I’m doing that kind of stuff when I’m older,” said a student watching Grannies’ anti-war toys protest (Munro, 1998: [np]). “Today I want to be a granny,” wrote Emily Worts in her search for hope after September 11, 2001 (2001: [np]). Former Granny Hilda Marczak (1998) has a collection of letters from junior high students which includes the following comments:

I’m very scared of nuclear war myself and I’m glad you’re trying to make people aware of what’s happening.

Your performance opened my eyes to what I was trying to ignore.

I personally am very afraid of nuclear war. I don’t like living everyday wondering if disaster is going to strike. Watching you perform made me laugh but also made me think. If I had the guts I would get up and express my feelings to the world.

I haven’t really been thinking about nuclear arms and was surprised when you explained that we are going to be buying those submarines. I thought we were getting rid of our weapons, not getting more! You certainly opened my eyes.

A university student also wrote eloquently about meeting the Montreal Grannies at a protest march against cuts to health care:



It isn't often that three scatter-brained male roommates ... grudgingly throw on wrinkled pants and end up dining with ten fabulous women they meet walking down the street. Oddly enough, this was the reality of my Saturday .... A phalanx of older women ... dressed in hideous layers of fabric and clownish shawls while they sang cheeky verses to common tunes .... The grannies were by far the highlight of a long march. While the grannies shared their political knowledge and concerns with us, they listened to what we had to say too. It was an enlightening exchange .... I remember leaving the buffet feeling somewhat inspired. I had just met a group of extremely creative, politically active older women who were trying to improve the lives of their fellow citizens ... one of the grannies mentioned that they might be attending the upcoming anti-globalization rallies in Quebec City. She said that if the grannies were able to make the trip they would stand in the front line ... and stare down riot police, florescent shawls on shoulders, sun hats laden with protest pins and song sheets firmly clasped in 80-year-old hands. (Fletcher, 2000: 4)

The opposite of hope is not anger but indifference. Rage born of compassion fuels creativity and risk taking. Anger and imaginative actions form a dynamic mix. The Raging Grannies positively transform rage and despair into creativity, commitment, at times courage. They have found the delicate balance Pam McAllister wrote about:

To focus on rage alone will exhaust our strength, forge our energy into a tool of the patriarchy's death-lure, force us to concede allegiance to the path of violence and destruction .... [but] Compassion without rage renders us impotent, seduces us into watered-down humanism, stifles our good energy. Without rage we settle for slow change, feel thankful for tidbits of autonomy .... It is with our rage that we ... find the courage to risk resistance. (1982: iv)

The Raging Grannies have created a dynamic figure of protest that allows for a collective identity as well as autonomy for local groups. They are a meaningful part of the chorus of dissent that is concerned with justice and a viable future. As Raging Grannies refuse to give up or shut up, they make us laugh so we can find insights and courage to boldly honour life.

rage and compassion in the face of suffering and injustice,  
resilience in the face of opposition and set-backs,  
laughter in the face of failure and mistakes,  
and virtuosity  
audacious, breathtaking, disciplined, and heartfelt  
in the face of limits. (Welch, 1999: 61)

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