

Rachel Zucker speaks to Darcey Steinke: Episode 83 of Commonplace

RZ: [Intro]: Hello, and welcome to episode eighty-three of Commonplace with novelist, memoirist, and professor Darcey Steinke. I'm your host, Rachel Zucker. I had the pleasure of recording with Darcey on November 14th, 2019 at her home in Brooklyn. Darcey Steinke is the author of five novels, a memoir, *Easter Everywhere*, about growing up as the daughter of a minister and a former beauty queen. Darcy is co-editor with Rick Moody of the anthology *Joyful Noise: the New Testament Revisited*. She has taught at The New School, Columbia University School of the Arts, NYU, Princeton, and The American University of Paris. She lives with her husband, investigative journalist Mike W. Hudson, in Brooklyn. In the conversation you are about to hear, Darcey and I speak about her newest book, a genre-fluid memoir called *Flash Count Diary: Menopause and the Vindication of Natural Life*. Of *Flash Count Diary*, writer Maggie Nelson, guest of Commonplace episode eighty-two, said, "Many days, I believe menopause is the new, if long overdue, frontier for the most compelling and necessary philosophy. Darcey Steinke is already there blazing the way. This elegant, wise, fascinating, deeply moving book is an instant classic. I'm about to buy it for everyone I know."

As is often the case, I agree with Maggie. There are hardly any books about menopause, and this is an excellent book. I have already bought several copies and deeply appreciated reading it. Darcey and I talk about hot flashes, insomnia, depression, sex, and why the disease model of menopause is inaccurate and mysoginist, a form of patriarchal anxiety and control. We talk about the way Darcey, who has always written about the body and about things that are transgressive, read and wrote and whale-watched her way through her journey of menopause, how fertility and creativity changed and continued to deepen, and the transformative experience of shifting from the work of motherhood to the work of leadership.

Perhaps you're thinking right now that you're not so interested in hearing two middle-aged women talk about a menopause memoir. Well, I'd like to try to convince you to keep listening. Menopause is not a disease, not a deficit, and not just a physical process. Darcey and I do talk about some of the physical changes of the aging body, and I talk a lot more about women's health and bodies in an upcoming episode with feminist science journalist Jennifer Block. I talk about these things with Jennifer because I find it necessary and fascinating to talk about the body and health, the history of medicine, the inaccuracies and injustices of healthcare. So if that's your passion, you'll love that episode. But while Darcey and I do talk about the physical body, we talk much more about menopause as life transformation or, as Maggie Nelson put it, a philosophy.

Jay Hammond, who has replaced Katie Fernelius, as Commonplace's sound editor and producer, said he, a cis man, loved hearing this conversation because it helped him think about what his mother might have been experiencing when he was younger and what his partner might experience in the future. It also led him to listen to Nick Cave's new work and to think about physical, spiritual, and emotional transitions in his own life. After listening to this conversation, Commonplace producer Doreen Wang, a cis woman in her thirties, expressed intense gratitude for the way Darcey and I give her hope and excitement for her future. Doreen said, "I feel like Rachel and Darcey are warning me about the shit that society is going to give me and then challenging it with their creations and their discourse and painting a whole new picture of what is possible. This particular Commonplace conversation really buoyed me up in a very nourishing way."

This episode is about menopause, the way the Anne Boyer episode is about cancer, which is to say it is, and it is about so much more. This conversation is about how to write the book you need to move through a life passage, about aging, about knowing when to try to fix something, and when to go toward brokenness. We talk about literary form and craft, about focusing on the staying-with or connecting aspects of discursive fragmented writing, rather than focusing on the fragmentedness. Darcey also talks about spirituality, singing, memoirs by trans authors, and gender fluidity at different phases of development. To learn more about the authors and texts we mentioned in this episode, please check out the show notes or visit our website, commonpodcast.com. There, you can also sign up for our newsletter, which comes out once per episode, and you can find out how to become a patron of Commonplace.

[5:40]

For this episode, some members of the Commonplace book club will receive *Jesus Saves* and *Suicide Blond*, both by Darcey Steinke, courtesy of Grove Books, *Flash Count Diary* by Darcey Steinke courtesy of Sarah Crichton books, *Speedboat* by Renata Adler, courtesy of NYRB books, and *Trans* by Juliet Jacques, courtesy of Verso Books. All Commonplace patrons will receive access to Darcey Steinke's rant assignment. Many thanks to all of you who support Commonplace as patrons and book club members. As you know, Commonplace has no ads and no corporate or institutional sponsorship. We thought about trying to get a lube company to sponsor this episode, but in the end, as always, it is you, patrons who made this episode of Commonplace possible.

The past few weeks have continued to be difficult: panic attacks, caretaker exhaustion, sleeplessness, pain, fear of the health and wellbeing of loved ones and strangers. But there have been moments--and I am so grateful for them--moments that are not exactly better or easier but when I'm able to think of these intense experiences not as symptoms of disease but as signs of being in the midst of a difficult but necessary transformation and being near the difficult but necessary transformations of others, moments when Darcey's phrase, "I feel more broken but on more solid ground" is enough to carry me forward. Sending love and strength and tolerance to experience brokenness to all of you. Here's Darcey Steinke.

[music]

RZ: Hi Darcey.

DS: Hi.

RZ: We're just gonna jump right in.

DS: Okay, good, good.

RZ: So I kind of wanted to tell you the story of how I came to your book.

DS: Okay, please.

RZ: Because first of all, I think it reveals something important about why I am so excited to be talking to you today but also something about the book. So in January of this year, I realized I was not feeling well. I was really tired. Something was wrong. In February I was like, "Something is really wrong!" I'd been having heavy bleeding, which I thought like, "Oh, this is normal, perimenopausal, heavy period stuff." I'm 47. People on the podcast have heard some of this. I've talked about it somewhat openly. In any case, things cascaded both slowly and very suddenly into a hysterectomy, which I was not happy about, did not want was. It was horrible. So after the hysterectomy, which I had in May, I was posting on Twitter all sorts of frustrations with the medical system, with the care that I received, with the lack of research about women's bodies and hysterectomy in women's health. So I'm tweeting about this--and also just my own experience--I'm tweeting about it. Then I get an email from Sarah Manguso, who is a friend of mine and an amazing writer. She's been on Commonplace. She says, "I saw your tweets. I want you to know that I had a hysterectomy a few months ago. I think you would like this book, and my review of the book is coming out in a few days." I was like, "Wait, what?" I immediately asked Christine Larusso, who's one of the producers on Commonplace, to order me the book from the publisher.

[10:00]

I was like, "I really need to read this book." At that moment in my post-hysterectomy recovery--it was about maybe a month out of the hysterectomy--I had this idea. I was like, "I'm only going to have people on Commonplace to talk about my hysterectomy, because this is what I need to talk about." Then a few days later, the book showed up, and it was the first book I read after my hysterectomy. I both devoured it and also really needed to read it slowly. I cried a lot when I read it. So then, I immediately ordered three copies for my friends--

DS: Oh good, I like hearing this.

RZ: --Erin, Arielle and Jen. Erin's birthday was coming up, and this seemed like the most perfect--these are all middle-aged lady friends who are going through some stuff with us. So I get a text from Erin, and she says, "Hey, thank you so much for the book. Did you not get the copy I sent you?" And I was like, "Wait, what? You said you sent me the same book?" Your publisher did not send me the book. Erin had bought me the book, having read Sarah's review.

DS: What an interesting thing coming together!

RZ: Absolutely. And then, of course, all of us ordered the book for other friends.

DS: Oh, I'm glad to hear this.

RZ: So I think the reason that I mentioned this is because in my small circle, in my unscientific study of the necessity of this book, it seems urgently necessary. It felt like an event. It felt like something that women I knew were really waiting for, even if we didn't always know we were waiting for it. It felt incredibly urgent and both like a godsend but also stirring the pot of realizing like, "Wait, what the hell? Why is there nothing? We've

been waiting for this.” So I want to talk about all of that. I want to talk about the necessity for the book. I want to talk about not just the content of the book, but for me, as a writer, the form of the book. It is vitally, first of all, so pleasurable. Maybe, for our listeners, will you start by talking about the story of your first hot flash and how this book--when and how--this book came to be.

DS: Okay. Okay. So around 52--I'm 57 now--maybe five years ago I had my first hot flash. I woke in the night just completely incandescent with heat, so hot, so sweaty. And my first thought was that it just seemed so not just getting hot and sweaty, but it seemed earth-shaking. My first thought was like--you know, I'm a minister's daughter--so it was like, “God is finally trying to contact me.” And I still sort of believe that in a way, that's the thing. I think there is a spiritual side and a metaphysical side to menopause that's not talked about very much. But in the next few days, I had more hot flashes and I--really, through Googling, which is what a lot of women have to do to find out menopausal information--I realized I was going through menopause.

Sleeplessness came with that, a sense of disorientation, and I searched around for some models, some information. I'm a writer, so I always look for books to help me move through my passages. I really couldn't find that many books that helped me. I found a few medical texts that were sort of helpful. All the memoirs that I found, they all ended with the women taking hormones, which sort of then ended the search and the transition you have in menopause, which I don't really believe is true. I don't think just taking a drug stops the transition. And then, a real catalyst, actually, as I was searching--I read in the *New York Times*, the *Tuesday Science Times*, that the two creatures that go through menopause are human women and female killer whales.

Now we know that short fin pilot, narwhals, and beluga whales also go through menopause. I read that in *The Times*, and then I also read in that same article that the post-reproductive whales around forty-five or fifty become the leaders of their communities, the leaders of their families. That really thrilled me. So I went over and read the article in *Nature Magazine* which talked about how they had studied these whales called the southern residents that live in Washington state, but they also were figuring out that maybe in early hunter and gatherer societies, menopause was selected in the Darwinian sense for the same reason that it was selected in killer whales, which is that around fifty, women got so smart and so valuable to the community for their knowledge--their knowledge of how to help people get along, their childcare knowledge, their knowledge of which plants are poisonous, all this kind of stuff--that it was important to have two kinds of women: women that could have children, which is incredibly important the incredible, incredible work of mothering, which is so important, and so hard, and then after 50 and after menopause, the incredibly important work of leadership.

[15:50]

That was probably the first positive idea I was able to latch onto. It was also the whales. The whales really pulled me into the book, my fascination with them. I got fascinated through Googling. There's a whale called Lolita that's been held captive in the Miami Seaquarium for about 50 years. I flew down and saw her, and that was the beginning. That was the very beginning. It brought me into this whole journey of reading about hormones, thinking about my own gender, rethinking my ideas about my mother,

thinking of myself as a creature, as an animal. There are so many things that became part of my intellectual and emotional life as I moved through the book.

RZ: I want to pick up on a bunch of the things you just said. So the title is *Flash Count Diary: Menopause and the Vindication of Natural Life*. I'm really interested in the title. Obviously, it's bringing up *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* by Mary Wollstonecraft--

DS: I should show you that I wore this--

RZ: Oh, very nice. Before we go, I got to take a picture of that.

DS: Okay.

RZ: So yeah, I want to hear about the book as a treatise, as a vindication--

DS: I think of it as a manifesto.

RZ: Yeah. So I really want to hear about that. Because it is a manifesto, and it also--formally, my understanding of *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is that it combined a lot of different forms and a lot of different styles of rhetoric and more of what we might call traditionally female writing with traditionally male writing, which I think your book also does. It's genre-nonconforming and genre-fluid, in a lot of ways.

DS: Absolutely.

RZ: But then there's also vindication of natural life. I'm really interested in the word natural. I'm thinking about it both as someone who is a non-practicing doula, involved in the birth world for a long time, and the way in which natural childbirth is, on the one hand, extremely polarizing and difficult to form a feminist coalition when you're stuck in that polarizing place, but also, I think, for many women, the idea of natural childbirth is not about drugs or no drugs but more about a certain philosophy of experience and maybe rethinking some of the misogynist--

DS: I would agree with that. I think this is a tricky question because I don't want to judge any women. These are personal choices, whether you get an epidural or you go on hormones, and women are judged enough. But, having said that for myself, I also had natural childbirth. I was really lucky. I had a very quick labor that just lasted a couple hours, so I was able to do it without drugs. It was an amazing experience, a powerful experience, incredibly painful, but completely transformative. I would say that my menopause is kind of similar. I chose not to go on hormones probably because my mother was on hormones and got breast cancer, and partly through my research I felt like it wasn't the right choice for me.

I also felt the hot flashes--I could think of them as a graduate school to the next part of life. I felt like an old sense of myself actually had to be burned off. You know what I mean? It had to be physically burned off over a couple year period. I actually had to be forced to think about who I was as a woman earlier, who I wanted to be. That transition

was going to be painful. And it was. So I learned from the body. My own body helped me to move through this transition, and by leaning into it and accepting it, I got a lot out of it.

[20:10]

Like I said, I certainly wouldn't want to make anybody feel bad or say that there's only one way to do it, but for my own personal experience, I would definitely agree with you that there's certain medical models that--since the rise of modern medicine, there's been a move to control women. There's no doubt about it. I just think we should admit that up front. There are a lot of problems with that, but there's also a way in which modern medicine could help ease some of these painful things in hard times. So I think both things are true, and it's important to hold that paradox.

RZ: Yeah. Let's be a little specific. So, some of the symptoms of menopause--and even the word symptoms sort of implies that menopause is not right--

DS: Like it's a disease, right.

RZ: So some of the qualities or some of the experiences that some women, many women, experience with menopause are the hot flashes, disorientation, sleeplessness--

DS: There are some sexual changes, for sure.

RZ: Yep.

RZ: Yeah. So you talk in the book about some of the possible advantages of those same experiences, which mostly have been seen as negative.

DS: Yeah, that's right. I mean, cycling's a drag. A lot of people are like, "Oh, the fertile woman--" but, you know, there's something really hard about cycling. Your hormones are up and down, all over the month. I've struggled with depression my whole life, and I feel like that hormonal up and down was really rough. Now that I'm outside of that, I feel so much steadier. I feel steadier. I feel like I'm on more solid ground. It's weird. I feel more broken, but I also feel like I'm on more solid ground. It's a combination of those two things, somehow.

RZ: The chapter that you wrote about your mother, largely at night, was so helpfully destroying to me, both as a lifelong insomniac and someone whose insomnia has gotten worse. So I still have my ovaries, even though I had my uterus out. Theoretically, I'm still perimenopausal. I didn't go into overnight menopause, although people know so little about what the function of the uterus and cervix actually are.

DS: No. People know so little. I'm not saying that I'm not grateful for medicine because I am, in scientific research. But when you actually go in and try to figure out what they know about these things, and particularly the female body, they hardly know any--yeah, it's crazy.

RZ: So wait, I'm going to come back to the insomnia question, but on the one hand, I feel enraged--and we're going to have to come back to female rage. I feel enraged that medicine and science knows so little. I feel completely let down by this. You also said in this conversation with Maud Casey, "No one knows what a woman is, which is great."

DS: Yeah, that's right.

RZ: --which is kind of the opposite. Can you say more about that?

DS: Can you say the first part of the question again? I remember the Maud Casey part because I think when you mentioned Maud, I got excited. I'm like, "I love Maud!"

RZ: Yeah. So on the one hand, I think the fact that science knows so little about women's bodies is--look, women are literally dying from the lack of knowledge and thoughtful research and understanding--

DS: --and misogyny--

RZ: --and misogyny, the lack of information around women's bodies. At the same time, you said this thing, which was "no one knows what a woman is, which is great," and I felt that too. It seems like a contradiction.

DS: Well, no, I don't think it's a contradiction because I think, in a way, our bodies are mysterious. I think science is doing what they can. I also think that there's not enough research on the female body, on menopause, but the idea that no one knows what a woman is really comes from the incredible contribution of trans women, which I'm just thrilled about because I feel like the more we have different kinds of women, the more I, as a cis woman, will be less contained. I'll be less compressed, you know what I mean? I'll have more freedom because there is more freedom in the idea of what a woman is. So that really thrills me a lot. That's been something that's been happening now for awhile, and that was definitely a part of menopause, too, where I felt a little bit of gender switch, and I looked to trans people like for inspiration in that, really.

[25:20]

RZ: You mentioned that you were disappointed by and large with the cis memoirs of menopause, which ended up with women taking hormone replacement therapy but that trans memoirs were actually really helpful to you.

DS: They were so inspiring because they were about people going through a hormonal transformation which was scary and hard and confusing but also exciting. They didn't think that the place they were going to get to was this negative, horrible place. They thought the place they were going to get with something like a new form was going to be exciting. That is more the model that I wanted for myself. Those were some of the books that helped me the most.

RZ: Will you share some of the titles?

DS: Yeah, *The Testosterone Files* is an amazing book by--is it Max Valerio?--he's a poet. He's amazing. And then *Trans: a Memoir*. I can't remember who that one's by. Then there was one other that I really liked. I read a bunch of them, and I really loved them. I guess I identified most with the female-to-male transition. Some of the ways that he felt as he was moving from a female orientation to a male orientation and some of the ways he felt even before he started to transition, I really identified with those as I moved through menopause. That helped me a lot.

RZ: I've heard you talk about--and this is something that I've also been thinking about and experiencing, like a new, more androgynous self, or a more fluid self. I cut my hair short for the first time in my life, right before I read your book and I was like, "This is super interesting." I'm thinking about a different kind of relationship to the male gaze, to my heterosexuality, to my cisness, like when one is officially through menopause and hasn't had a period for at least a year. And isn't cycling. My question is: these transitions, these changes, do you now feel static or are you still changing?

DS: Right. Well, I'm at the point now where I'm still having some hot flashes, but they're not as severe. I don't have the panic attached to them now. I've also kinda gotten used to it. I don't sleep quite as well; I get up a couple times at night, but I'm used to that now. These things don't seem like big, terrible things anymore. They just seem like parts of my life. I guess now I do feel like I'm on a plateau, but I know that there will be more change. That's the thing about the aging body, right? I just went through--I had a herniated disk; I just had back surgery, so I'm in recovery from that, and I really see now going forward that the thing about the aging body is it's constantly transforming. We can think of it as decaying, which in some ways it is, but we can also just think of it as changing.

I always think about the way the medical world acts. Like, menopausal women don't have enough hormones, but nobody says like an eight year old girl doesn't have enough hormones. It's just about a life stage where you have certain amounts of hormones. It's certain times of life. It's really insane to think of it as, like, "Now we're in this diseased place where we are suffering a lack, and it's all downhill from here." I also think it's a form of control. I think outside of the domestic sphere, once we can no longer get pregnant, we're not tied to the house as much. We're more dangerous, as political forces, as intellectual forces. It makes sense that the patriarch would try to demean us and debase us. That makes a lot of sense to me. I don't know if I think these things happen consciously or if it's just the way the society is. There's always a lot of anxiety around women who aren't under the control of men, you know?

RZ: Yeah. And in terms of feeling your gender shift or your gender expression, your gender identity, shift, do you feel like that is in a plateau or in a stable place? Or do you feel like you've entered a new phase in which flux but not cycling is more of the norm? Not that you've gotten used to--

[30:00]

DS: Let's see. I just feel more like my authentic self. I feel like I've stepped away from the sexual script that I used my whole life as a fertile woman, which was centered on intercourse, I'll be honest. I've stepped away from that. I'm lucky: I have a very

adventuresome and lovely husband who's willing to go with me there. I just feel less gendered and just more like me--you know what I mean--like a body that happens to have a vagina. I don't really feel like I need to be all femme-y and in my silk nightgowns, spreading myself out in a super femmed-up way. I feel more just like, "Here I am, wanting to please the person I love, wanting to get pleasure from the person I love. This seems really sexy to me. I used to think of this like, "Oh God, these people, the man looks more like a woman; the woman looks more like a man. They're in their sixties or seventies. How do they do it?" But now I think, "Oh my God, wow. What a sexy phase that is. Because nobody has to pretend there's something else." Like they're just like, "it doesn't have to be all this drama and all this posturing. It can just be sort of like two souls coming together."

RZ: Yeah. You had a great interview on NPR where you're pretty explicit about your new sex life or your shifting sex life.

DS: Yeah, that was interesting. They interviewed me for about an hour, and of course they chose the ten minutes in which I talked about lube, which is fine. I stand by my lube, but still, it was a funny to hear that. [laughs]

RZ: [laughs] I loved when you also said--all the interviews I've listened to of you are melding together in my mind--you said that you were worried that your daughter, who's a young adult now, would hear that and would be like, "Oh my God, my mom is talking about her sex life radio," and instead she was like "Yes!"

DS: Yeah! I decided to ask her because if I feel like she might be mad at me or embarrassed, I'll try to make a place for that by talking to her about it. So I asked her, "Was it weird to hear your mom talking about lube on national radio?" And she was like, "Oh, mom, you spoke your truth. I thought it was so moving." And I was just like, "Oh my God, wow! The millennials are amazing!" So that just thrilled me. That really thrilled me.

RZ: I read chunks of your book out loud to my twenty year old son, and he was very interested.

DS: That's so great. I love that.

RZ: Super interested. So new, exciting, sexy, sex life possibilities, which involve more communication and more lube. And coming back to some of the potential openings and opportunities of these things thought of as symptoms, like vaginal dryness is something that's actually an opportunity, insomnia, also maybe an opportunity, and certainly leadership. Can you talk about creativity or maybe ways in which the experience led you to a kind of form or a kind of engagement with writing that was maybe new for you? I'm not saying any of these things are like if someone chooses to take hormone replacement therapy, they're not going to get all these things.

DS: Yeah, I don't think that's true. I chose to try to write a book that would help, not just about the experience but to travel through the experience. The book was definitely a journey. I think this book is really a continuation of my work. I've always written about the body. I've always written about things that were sort of transgressive. I've always written about the movement of the body, changes in the body, sensations of the body. So this

book seems to come very naturally out of my work. I don't think it's new. I don't think thematically it's at all new. The form, which is more broken up and more discursive--I've always had a discursive style, but this is even more so--kinda came from all the incredible discursive work that's coming out now that I love so much--Maggie Nelson, Sarah Manguso--so many people. And even before that, *Speedboat* by Renetta Adler--I've always wanted to write a book in little chunks--Fanny Howe, who I love, particularly her spiritual writing.

I just felt like the experience was form-to-content. you know? The experience is really fragmenting--menopause! It wouldn't make much sense to have a linear narrative then. What would be the sense in saying "This happened; this happened; this happened," where that's not what I experienced. People talk about a midlife crisis, but a true moment of reckoning in sort of has an eternal feeling. You're thinking about your death, but you're also remembering when you were five years old. It's a disjunction that includes all ages. So all these things led me to this more fragmented form, also, to try to get as many voices, not have just my voice in the book but have as many voices as possible. That has to do with the hundred women--I interviewed a very diverse group of women--and then all the books I read. For every chapter, I read about 20 books and tried to figure out what I identified with, what I wanted to dilate, what I thought about these things.

[35:35]

I feel, in some ways, because I didn't have a community, I wanted to make my own community, in the book itself, because I felt so isolated and alone. I wanted to try to find voices. Even if they weren't speaking about menopause--maybe they were speaking about insomnia or maybe they were speaking about what it was like to have a difficult mother or maybe they were speaking about what it was like to feel like an animal--I could bring all these voices in, for my own communal care that I wasn't getting in the real world.

RZ: I've tried to think about the kind of writing you're talking about as a poetics of motherhood or motherhood writing. That's sort of gotten me into trouble in certain ways, even just with myself, like thinking, "Is this an essentialist way of talking and thinking about gender and thinking about maternal versus not-maternal experience." But I think that what I've been looking for is a way to describe relational writing, and reading your book really helped me. Even from this very small thing that you describe--I can't remember if you describe it in the book or in an interview--where your husband says "Well, you seem to do better when you stay with the whales."

DS: It comes from an interview. But yeah, that was funny. Because when I first discovered the whales, I was so excited, and I was researching the whales and I didn't know if I was going to write an article. I hadn't decided to write a book yet. I remember I had a bad day. I had really bad sleep, and in the morning, he just came and sat by the bed and he said, "When you stay with the whales, you seem to do really good. But when you go away from the whales, you don't seem to do that good." That really made me think, "Wow, even he notices this! I need this totem. I need Granny J2, this beautiful killer whale, to pull me through this experience."

RZ: Right! I think that so much of this writing, like the writers that you're describing who have been incredibly important to me and the discursiveness and the fragmentation, I mostly see people talking about the fragmentation, and that makes sense to me. I think that sometimes it comes out of motherhood, the experience of being one person and suddenly being two people and then being two people but separated, I think that's true, but this idea, also, of staying with, whether it's staying with your subject matter, staying with the whales, in particular, or staying with menopause and continuing. Just being with. I feel somehow focusing on fragmentation rather than the relational aspect of it is as much a kind shortsighted, maybe patriarchal critical, literary critical mistake.

DS: That's interesting. Yeah, yeah. Because it's really about connection. It's about the connections. That's one of the nice things about getting older. You've been through a lot of life experience and you've also read a lot of books, and so the connections you can make, I think, are maybe--for me, anyway--more varied. For me, they interest me more. It's really about the connections between the fragments. It's not really about the fragments. I find it really exciting when I can because that's how my mind works. I feel like it's best to try to write the way you talk and also to write the way you think. So I could feel like I got those two things down the best I've ever gotten them in a book form. I feel happy about that. I want to keep moving in that direction. That's been really exciting.

RZ: Maybe the disorientation is part of that.

DS: I know. Well, you don't know what's gonna happen next. I think it's important to keep the reader in the paradox with you, and then as you move around and expand the idea, dilate the idea, pull the idea back, contrast the idea, disagree with your own self, the reader's there with you, as you're doing those things. That's kind of exciting. It's an exciting reading experience when that happens.

[40:00]

RZ: I love the way you're using the word dilate by the way.

DS: Yeah. [laughs]

RZ: So what are you working on now or might work on next?

DS: Well this interesting project actually came to me just a few days after I had my back surgery and I was still in recovery. I got a call from my British publisher telling me that the singer Nick Cave was going to have a show in Copenhagen, about his life and his work, and he wondered if I would write the the essay for the coffee table book. At first I was like, "Can I do this? I'm recovering; I'm still on narcotics," but then I thought, "Wow, what an amazing--" you know, I've always loved Nick Cave. The religious sensibility in the work has always spoken to me, so I decided to do it. I'm near the end. I just got a draft, and I have two more weeks. I gotta really work on it hard. It's due December 1st. So that's been an amazing experience--to listen to all of his records, read his novels, read his writing, just think about his work as a whole, talk to him on the phone. He's very interesting theologically, a very engaged rockstar, very theologically engaged rockstar. So that's been really exciting for me. That's what I'm doing right now.

Then I'm going to write--Douglas Martin is a friend of mine, and his book *Branwell*--his wonderful book about the missing Bronte brother, *Branwell*, is coming out again from Soft Skull Press. It's being reprinted, and I'm going to write the forward. That'll be the next project that's due at the end of January. Then I want to give myself a little time off, to read books and go to movies and wander around the city because the little bit of time I had between my book coming out and my surgery was really spent in pain. There was a lot of pain. It's true that I was standing, watching a lot of movies on the Criterion Channel, but it wasn't really pleasant. I was always in pain. So I want to give myself a month or two to really be, be in the world, walk in Prospect Park--I love Prospect Park--so walk in prospect park. I'll be teaching of course because I always teach, and I'll be doing a little traveling. I was invited to be a part of the Women Writers' Festival in Sydney, Australia.

RZ: Cool! So, it seems like--and I'm hope I'm not just begging you for this--that this is a creatively fertile time in your life with a lot of energy and a lot of independence but connection.

DS: Yeah. I mean, my argument would be that your fertility continues, that it's different than it was because you're can't actually have children, but your fertility continues in the things that you do: works at the imagination, works of empathy, caring for your loved ones, for your friends, and my political resistance work, with my students. It's a very fertile time. I mean, I sort of hate to use the word fertile because I always feel like as you age, when people want to give you a compliment, they always are saying, "You look young, you look great." I wish there was another way to say you look good or you're doing well without saying that you're feeling fertile or you're looking young because those things are beautiful, but those things fall away, and there can still be beauty and meaning. It's hard though. The culture really hasn't figured out how to do that yet.

RZ: Yeah. But what I'm latching onto is there's something to look forward to.

DS: Oh, I think so. Yeah. I think completely. Yeah. Particularly, my ability to concentrate and to commit myself to my imaginative work has been incredible. Like to write this last book, to write *Flash Count Diary*--I had to write it. I sold it on a proposal, so I had to write it quickly, which I'm not used to doing. I just rushed to my desk every day. It was so exciting. I read all these books. I worked on it every day. My daughter's graduated from college now and out of the house, so I didn't really have her to worry about. My husband was nice. We did a lot of takeout during that time. I was able to commit myself to my work in a way that I haven't been able to do since she was born--twenty-five years--so that was fantastic. That's been one of the biggest gains actually. And also, having more time to yourself, to wander around in the park and think about nothing, you know? And then also being able to be involved in other people's lives: my nephews, and my dad, who's aging, I love having dinner with him. I love my family. I still see my daughter. I'm very lucky that she lives in New York. But just the way you can expand yourself out into other little niches of life is very, very beautiful.

RZ: I think I'm just coming out of a place where my cohort is largely still somewhat in the mindset of the super pressured early maternal years--and actually, that's not true for us anymore--but we kind of haven't--my youngest is twelve. I have twenty, eighteen, and twelve.

DS: Wow.

[45:30]

RZ: Yeah. As my friend said, poor planning. [laughs] But I do think that like, if I just think of my cohort who has the older kids, I think, especially when they have just gone to college, your sense of yourself and the world has not caught up to the experience that you're having.

DS: Right, right, right.

RZ: And so what you're describing is really important for me to know that at least it could exist for me.

DS: Totally. The problem is that the culture just attaches so much shame. I just feel like it's debased so much life after fifty for women. We're shamed as sexless crones with nothing to do, shrill and bitchy and just in every way debased. But it's just not true. It's a lie.

DS: Yeah. Speak it, Darcey. So I want to go back to the concept of the authentic self. Maybe I'll start with a super physical way of thinking about this. So on the one hand, you were having these hot flashes and realized that you were entering menopause and were interested in not suppressing those symptoms and seeing what it would be like to have an authentic experience of your self changing, and who you were.

DS: Right.

RZ: On the other hand, when you had a herniated disc in your back, the pain--this was not your authentic self. You were like, "Okay, I need surgery. I need drugs."

DS: Yeah. I mean, I am not a surgery person. After three months of physical therapy, every chiropractor, every acupuncturist searching for everything, doing all my exercises, I was just like, "I can't take anymore right now."

RZ: Right. And that's how I felt about my hysterectomy. I was like, "Okay, this isn't what I want to have happen, but I could bleed to death and have that authentic experience, and that would not really be the point."

DS: Yeah, exactly.

RS: Can we talk about your stutter?

DS: Sure, yeah. Of course.

RZ: So I'm super interested in the article you wrote in the *New York Times* because I think one thing that's quite difficult, especially when you're in the middle of an experience

or when it's you that has to figure out like, "Wait, what part of this is my authentic self, and what part of this do I just need help with or I need to change?"

DS: Or it could be both too!

RZ: Right. Exactly. Exactly. You wrote about how on the one hand you did have speech therapy for the stutter, and then you wrote so interestingly about this experience of being at this party with all of these all these stutterers, some of whom really felt that the speech therapy you'd had was shaming and invasive and that it had made it more difficult for you to stay with your authentic self, which was as a stutterer.

DS: I think that's right.

RZ: You talk really beautifully about some of the ways in which stuttering opens up a space of empathy and connection between you and your students, you and listeners at an audience. On the other hand, I can also understand why your mother might have said, "Okay, well, I want you to be able to speak as fluently as possible in the world."

DS: Of course. She saw how frustrated I was.

RZ: So I think that's a really interesting one that comes back to the question of natural, right? How do you know when to say, "This is not who I am," or "I'm going to try this intervention."

DS: Right. As far as what's just happened with my back: childbirth pain, it lasts a few days at the most, if you have a long labor. Herniated disc, the pain was not something that I could really handle. If I had known it had had a limit, I would have maybe been able to handle it, but there didn't seem to be any limit. So that's something to think about. Or the hot flashes--I knew that I wouldn't be having that level of hot flashes for thirty years. A few years seem like a lot, and up to ten years seems like a lot, but I also knew that it had a point of diminishment. That to me is a big thing to think about. You're not going into this chronic place. You're going through a phase rather than settling into a chronic place. There's that.

[50:10]

But then I also think I don't know. It's hard to know. With my stutter, my mother was very loving, but she also really had a lot of ideas that I was gonna marry a lawyer and have a rich lady's life, the kind of life she had wanted for herself. That included speech perfection. That was the part that I resented more than the speech therapy itself. I felt bad a little bit in that article because a lot of my speech therapists, those and ones I had before, were quite kind and loving. It was their orientation to the problem that kinda gave me the wrong idea. I know now some people do have speech therapy to cure their stutters, but a lot of people have speech therapy to stutter more comfortably, to get used to.

The fascinating thing about stuttering is I really only do it now when I read out loud and sometimes when I'm tired or when I'm nervous. It makes this sort of atmospheric disturbance that's really kind of fascinating. It's a really interesting space, and it can make people really uncomfortable. If we got used to it more, if everybody got used to it more--why should we all speak like newscasters? It just makes no sense. Why can't we

get used to it? It's true with any disability rights kind of thing--why can't we work on ourselves to change the idea of what's normal and what people feel okay with? I definitely feel like my stutter is something that has more gains than losses. It really helped me. I just don't think I'd be a writer otherwise. The way it made me obsessed with language--I mean really deeply obsessed with sound--the way it turned me into an interior being since there was a lot of anger and shame--all those things helped me become the person I am now and turned me to my imagination, to the writing life.

RZ: I've always wanted to teach a class--but I can't quite figure out how to structure it--basically that would be half writing workshop and half reading. The underlying principle would be that most writers, or many writers or many artists, are writing into their place of difference.

DS: It'd be interesting! I teach visual art studio art students at NYU, and they often have learning disabilities or visual intricacies or whatever that you can tell have moved them into visual arts, which is interesting, too.

RZ: Right! And trying to present to a student, like, "What is your place of greatest eccentricity or most a-typicalness or--

DS: --or even brokenness!

RZ: Absolutely.

DS: I'm back and forth with some of the ideas in my faith but the cross is one I always like because I love this Simone Veil idea of where the two boards hit each other, that's where you should be because that's the static in your life. That's the paradox in your life. That conflict is the thing that will actually attach you to the divine and to the internal, the actual conflict. That's something that I think is really true.

RZ: Yeah. It's so different from the way we often think of education or art as identifying the thing that you're best at, and then get good at it and then get better and better at it.

DS: Right, perfection, be a genius. Become a genius because you're so great and perfect. I just don't believe that.

RZ: Well I also don't know that it leads to very interesting or accessible writing. And by accessible I don't mean--I mean that you can enter into it.

DS: Right, right, right. You can find yourself there, there's room, there's really room for you to move around. You can tell. You teach, so you can tell when you teach students when they are attached to their organic subject matter. You can tell when they're getting attached to that and the energy that's released and how excited they are to be there. There are different ways to try to release that. Like as I work with my studio art students--it's hard because a lot of them are afraid of writing--but I really try to get to those little spots where writing can move more freely. Just last week we did rants. I think a rant is a spot that language moves into very organically.

[55:00]

RZ: So wait, what was the assignment? I'm so curious!

DS: Well, we read an artistic manifesto by a Japanese artist then they could either write a manifesto or a rant. One of them wrote about how she's from Nashville and how New Yorkers just stop when they get off the train and look at their phones for a few moments like zombies. That was really funny. Another student wrote about how in the building where we have class, the bathroom lights are on ten second timers. They're obviously timed for men. You're sitting in the bathroom and the light goes off in 10 seconds. You're literally sitting there in the dark, and you have to wave your arm to get it going. So that was funny. There were other things too. There was a couple that wrote about crits they had gotten on their art in college that they had thought were unfair, which reminded me of how I started to write. When I lived in one neighborhood in Philadelphia, there was a bully, and he would really tease me about my stutter. I remember later going through notebooks and finding all these ways that I was trying to stand up to him in writing, what I should have said to him or what I would say to him next time. Those things were the very beginnings of my writing, actually, when I was little, little, little, little, like, second and third grade. So we worked on that a lot. I think there are little spots where writing can flow through, in ways. I think you can help students find that and then hope then that that will open up to some bigger projects or some things on different subjects.

RZ: Do you want to read something from the book?

DS: Sure.

RZ: Awesome.

DS: I might stutter. So be prepared.

RZ: Awesome.

DS: [reads from *Flash Count Diary*]

RZ: You have this expression--is this a thing you made up or is this something you read--to make something dead into food?

DS: I think I made it up! I don't know. Maybe it's referenced somewhere, but it's very communion-Christianity, my religious background. My dad's a Lutheran minister. I mean, that's what the communion is supposed to be, a metaphor for the body. Well, it's supposed to be the body of Christ, a metaphor for the body of Christ. It's a pretty well known metaphor.

RZ: It's not in my background, so maybe that's part of why I was like, "What is happening here?" To me, this image and this idea of what's happening in the middle of the night, what's happening when we go over these archetypal primary relationships and these traumas and these old connections and separations, instead of thinking these as neuroses or dangerous obsessions or "Why can't you just move on?" but thinking about making something dead into food, being awake in the middle of the night, having had a hot flash, maybe feeling closer to the divine or out of your body and in more in your body

than ever, the opportunity to do that just struck me as something I hadn't thought of before.

DS: The hot flashes, of course, had their spiritual qualities, but the insomnia had a lot of spiritual qualities, too, for me, like being up late at night, thinking about the expanse of my life, thinking about my relationship with my mother, which I ended up doing a lot. I had a very formidable mother. I'm happy to report that our relationship is better than ever. She's been gone for about six years, and the relationship goes on, for sure. I'm thinking about the life I could have had, the things I had done wrong but also the things I'd done right, and the joy and the pleasure that I had in my life. It was a real reckoning realizing for better or worse, this is my life. I won't be twenty-five again; I won't be thirty-five again. The value of the life that I've lived--it's valuable because it's mine. It's my life! That was something I really hadn't felt before. I felt like I'd been in the stream of life and hadn't really paused to think about all this, but that was really helpful to me.

[1:00:25]

RZ: It doesn't sound like your mother ever got to a place where she was able to have that same feeling about her life.

DS: It was hard. The hard thing about my mother was her unhappiness. I think Frank Bidart has that line like "what your parents give you are their lives." I find that to be like a heavy burden sometimes. It's hard. As time goes on, as the world changes and I change my relationship to her, changes come to my memories of her and also to her spiritual manifestation. I think one of the gifts of death is that a lot of the thorns fall off, and you can sorta just feel the love, that there was love even though there were tremendous difficulties and there was also anxiety and paradox and animosity even. There's a way in which love sort of transcends that. It's a very beautiful thing.

RZ: Yeah. I feel happy and grateful that you were up in the middle of the night thinking about your mother, writing about your mother, getting in touch with these questions of shame and anger and joy and pleasure and happiness in ways that I just really haven't seen explored before.

DS: Oh, thank you. Thanks a lot for that.

RZ: Yeah!

DS: There's a way that sometimes mother-daughter stuff--it's kinda like women's health. It's kinda debased and made sentimental. It's sentimentalized and kind of debased. Somehow war is a serious subject, but mother-daughter relationship is not a serious subject. You know what I mean? It's frustrating. Yeah, yeah. But these are very serious things that in my work have been able to stand up to a lot of study in thought and sinking into and thinking about and existing and bearing witness to. These are things that have given me a lot of--maybe I can even just say an overused word--healing.

RZ: Do you have anything that's coming to mind when you think about--because you did have love, but you didn't have a model of the kind of woman or the kind of mother that you wanted to be and that you've become. So how did you--without that model in your mother--come--obviously women have all kinds of different relationships with their mothers, but even women, I would say, who by and large who have positive

relationships with their mother, there's so little conversation about this stage of life that I don't know anyone who feels that they had a model for this.

DS: So true. There's maybe one out of the hundred women, or nearly a hundred women, I interviewed said that her mother had had a frank and helpful talk with her--one out of a hundred! --about this. I just think there was so much shame about it in the earlier generation that there was a disconnect. That's one thing we can really work on. We can talk to our daughters and our sons. It just needs to be normalized. If it could be taught in school along with puberty, menstruation, childbirth, menopause, totally normalized.

RZ: Not that those other things are properly taught in school either.

DS: Oh totally. But let's throw it in there and try, you know what I mean?

RZ: Yeah, yeah. And not as a disease.

DS: Not as a disease, just normal life cycle stuff. Let's just lay it out there like that.

RZ: Yeah! Like, "Oh wait, there's an opportunity to become the wise woman leaders."

DS: Right! When I was taught about--it was in the seventies, and that was terrible, but I was taught about menstruation. There was a lot of shame, like I should be ashamed if someone knew I was menstruating, all that kind of stuff. But there was also a feeling in these goofy films that there was going to be a lot of excitement and joy, too. So we could do the same thing with menopause. We could be like, "It's difficult. There are hard things, but there's a lot of excitement and joy in that too." It could be taught in the exact same way, I feel like.

RZ: Yeah. All right. So everything's so hunky dory, fantastic, wonderful. What did you leave out of the book, or what do you see--it's not that you don't put the complexity in there, but what's the shadow or that you feel like is the thing that you still really have not come to terms with or that you were like, "Too much!"

[1:05:10]

DS: Some things came up, like--I have a daughter, and that's great. I would have maybe liked to have more children. I think at midlife, when you really know for sure that's not going to happen--that was a certain reckoning. Some of the things that I wasn't able to do--that was a reckoning. But it forces you to move toward coming to terms with it, stuff that was invisibly shadowing you. Unconsciously, you have to think, "Okay, this is the reality now." Though I do have desire, and I just adore my husband, I sometimes do miss those days like in your twenties when you just stay in bed all day and drink wine and have sex. Some of that, the ferocity of sexual desire, I miss that. I haven't had that for a long time, but I sometimes think, "Oh wow, that was amazing to be in that sexual haze, to have desire really motivate almost everything you do, sexual desire."

I wouldn't want to go back there, but I sometimes think of it fondly, to think that your time on this earth is limited. I may, if I'm lucky, have thirty-five more years, you know? That's something. That's sobering. That's not always easy. To know that those years--there's joy and there's interesting stuff in the new phases, and there may be some imaginative and intellectual freedom, but--my body, no doubt about it, will break down. I plan to stay

as healthy as possible, but there will be some things that limit me. There will be some challenges. That's not that fun to think about, but better to think about it and start getting used to it and think of it not as a catastrophe but as a natural phase of life. That's, to me, important.

I always remember--I have a friend that's a nun; she's an Episcopal, Sister Leslie, I write about her a lot in my book *Easter Everywhere*. I remember at one point she was telling me there was a nun there that was sick and was going to die. She was saying, "But that nun, she still hasn't forgiven these people. She's this, this, this, this." And I was both cheered that there was a nun that was dying that still had all these spiritual problems, but also, I could tell that Sister Leslie really wanted to help her get there, get to a place of peace before she died. That was something that really has stuck with me, that you never stop being a pilgrim. You never stop being a seeker. You always can try to be more empathetic, try to realize your privilege more, try to expand yourself more. I try to be less judgmental. There's all those things that you can continue to try to work on, you know? I just don't think the strategy of trying to stay the same is a very good strategy. I understand why some people do it, but I just don't ultimately think that it really can work. I just think going with the reality, no matter how grim and negative it is, is better than trying to fight it.

RZ: Absolutely. It gets super complicated. I think about my son, struggling with depression, and recognizing, not trying to close off to experiences, but also at a certain point saying "This is just not tolerable. This is not who he is." That's so interesting to me. How much of life is actually in-between?

DS: No, I think about that a lot, too. I've like struggled with depression my whole life. I've been on and off antidepressants, and before my back, I was off for about fifteen years, and I was able to manage it with exercise and all this stuff. But once the pain started up, I really felt myself starting to circle the drain. So I jumped back on again. I hope after I stabilize myself, I can jump back off again. I feel like I'm learning. I'm starting to know myself well enough where I know the difference. I know the difference between a good couple melancholy days that are productive, in a weird way, or thinking about the world, which does have a lot of problems. It needs a lot of help. Versus when the depression is sunk into me and my worldview is changing in a way that isn't really reflective of my soul and my mind, I feel like I need to jump back on. I would always do that. I feel like they've been very helpful to me. I'm not against them at all. I feel like if I can be off though, I want to be off them, but if I have to be on them, I'm willing to be on them. I feel very strongly about that.

[1:10:10]

RZ: Yeah. Yeah. I know that your spiritual life is important to you. As you said, your father was a Lutheran minister. Do you have a spiritual practice or a religious affiliation right now?

DS: My main spiritual practice is my writing. I always remember--the nun that I was talking to, Sister Leslie, used to say to me--I used to talk about my prayer life or my meditation life and my writing life, and she would say---"Darcey, these are the same exact things. Why do you always have to split them up?" So I do feel like the three or four or five hours I spend a day writing, as you know, is my main spiritual practice. I do

meditate, sometimes more, sometimes less. When I was in pain, it was hard. I'm trying now to get back to a half hour in the morning. I'm not in the going to church phase right now. I've been a little bit thinking, "Oh, should I try?" There's a Buddhist monastery in Carroll Gardens. I've thought about going to some of their meditation. I'm mor their, now, at the moment. I go back and forth. I feel, in some ways, it's been helpful to me to finally be like, "Okay, the thing you're looking for is not in church. You can find it in books and conversations, in talking on the phone to Nick Cave about God. You're gonna be able to find it in lots of ways and shouldn't have to worry about that."

But I grew up in the church. I grew up singing. I miss singing a lot. I sometimes think "Should I join a choir? Or should I just go to church and sing some hymns?" I really think singing is good for you. That's one of the few places in the world that you can sing. I mean, there's karaoke, but I like to sing with other people. That's something I miss. And I sometimes do miss the liturgy, the rituals, because I came up in the church. My first memories are crawling around underneath the pews or seeing my dad up in the pulpit, preaching. So I sometimes do long for that. My interest in faith is an ever-changing thing. My theology is changing all the time. My book really moved me toward pantheism, kind of, and toward the natural world, the animal world. My current work on the Cave project has kind of convinced me--he talks about Jesus a lot, talks about biblical imagery a lot, and it's kind of reminded me that I don't really need to make a choice. I can have all of this. I can have nature. I can have pantheism. I can also think about Jesus if I want. I can read the Psalms. I'm very interested in the Psalms. I feel like that example of how from one line to the next, everything is terrible and everything is great, then everything is terrible, everything is great, has really informed my writing. I find that to be probably one of my biggest influences and very valuable. I don't want to throw that out completely.

RZ: Sure.

DS: I never really get settled. Theologically, I'm always changing. I'm always reading things. I'm always having different ideas. I mean, I guess, if anything, I sort of feel now the movement of my own mind, my imagination, is God. Do you know what I mean? The creative force is God. I mean, that's where it would be right now, I would say.

RZ: I love that. What is a question that nobody asks you, about this book or about your writing life, or about your life, either because they're too dumb or too shy or too ill-informed that you wish, like, "Why didn't they ask me this?" I'm not trying to get you to do my work for me.

DS: Yeah, hm. When I think about my own writing life, something I'm really proud of that doesn't get talked about is just, you know, I grew up in this little ranch house in Virginia, Roanoke, Virginia, and went to public school. I remember I wrote my senior term paper on Sylvia Plath, and the teacher had never heard of her. That's not to say anything bad about the teacher because I'm sure she knew a lot of other things, and she had done a great job on the place of Shakespeare, but just how different my life is now, how I move in a world that's just the world I always wanted for myself, a world of the imagination, of knowing people who are interested in ideas, a world that's very open. I don't know. I feel very proud of that. I feel very proud that I was able to imagine a life for myself and then move slowly, incrementally toward that life.

RZ: That's incredible.

DS: Yeah. I feel very proud. That's the thing I'm the most proud of. I mean, I'm very proud of being a good mother and a good wife and a good family member and community member. But that's something I'm really proud of.

[1:15:10]

RZ: Do you remember how you came upon Sylvia Plath at that age? Well, I was lucky that both my parents were very smart. My mom was going to college when I was in high school, so there was some of that. My dad was a big reader. He did write poetry himself, and he read poetry. I don't know if it was through him, or, I don't really know exactly how it was, but there were always lots of really good books around the house, and he would give me books, and we would talk about it. My mother, also--she wasn't quite as big a reader, but she was very interested in the arts. I remember we took classes at the fine arts center, and she really wanted us to be good. She wanted us to have that outlet and know about that world. I was lucky in that way. Even though that wasn't the norm in the people I knew or the neighborhood or anything like that.

There was really a lot of depression when I grew up. The seventies, the sixties had happened; some people had lost their kids in the Vietnam War. There was such incredible social disorientation that I have a lot of memories of moms just basically sleeping all day on Valium and just being really sad. There was a lot of sadness, a lot of divorce. It was a hard time. I have a lot of sympathy for it, the hardness of that time, which I think connects in a way to what we're seeing now with some of the Trump followers, actually the depression and the hardship and the struggle, which I got to see firsthand. But I also got to see some of the scary parts firsthand, too, the drunken dads making racial remarks. I saw both sides of it. So it's tough, but just the fact that I've been able to have a life that includes--I always felt like one of the best things about me has to do with being a minister's daughter. I'm very comfortable around a wide variety of people. I can be around people of different social classes, different ethnicities, and I just feel very comfortable.

I remember we used to visit the sick, which often was pretty intense, or bring turkeys to people that were really poor. Then, also, you would have to have dinner with the wealthiest member of the congregation's family and jump on their trampoline in their yard. That always seemed to me like an exciting and engaged model for life. Maybe I don't have quite as much variation as I'd like in some of those areas now, but I do have a fair amount of variety in my life, as far as the people, the ideas, the passions. My husband's an investigative reporter, so that brings a lot of interesting people. Investigative reporters are very passionate, so that brings a lot of interesting people into our lives, and the stories that they're doing, their engagement in the stories, these stories that are usually centered on social justice, are very amazing, very moving. So I feel just so grateful. Really, really grateful.

RZ: You're making me think about my grandmother. My mother was super problematic. I've written a whole book about that.

DS: Is it one of the books you just gave me?

RZ: No, I should have given it to you. It's called *MOTHERS*. I'll send it to you.

DS: Yes, please do.

RZ: But, you know, she was really doing the best that she could. Her mother was really very brutal and blaming and hard. My grandmother was very poor, as was my grandfather. They were first-generation, Newark, New Jersey, and then kept moving to these slightly more affluent suburbs in New Jersey. My mother really was an artist who was being really trapped and contained by her parents, but they loved music. My grandmother loved--she always had public radio on. It's just so interesting, these small things. Like, I would never say my grandmother really gave my mother what she needed and then my mother really gave me. And yet, these things that are kind of--

DS: Yeah, in trying to do the best they can, the beauty that they were drawn to can have a strong influence on you, even if in other ways you don't feel like you are that cared for.

RZ: Yeah.

[1:20:22]

DS: I feel like I was kind of under-mothered, but I also do see my mother as really having a hard time and in some ways doing the best she could.

RZ: Yeah. Any questions for me?

DS: I don't think so! I really appreciate you coming to my house and reading the book and reading it with such passionate engagement. It really means a lot to me. That's what's meant the most to me in this book is--when the book first came out, I had dozens of women writing to me, every week email. Now I get a couple a week, and I get people on my social media as well, but just the enthusiasm, the incredible enthusiasm for the book and just the honesty. It's been really moving to me to have these exchanges with women and to hear them talk about their own lives. It's been really rich. I'd say maybe it's been the best part of my writing life so far, the most rewarding thing. I mean, besides just my love of sitting at my desk. The idea of hearing from individual women directly--this has been part of that, so thank you so much.

RZ: Well thank you. You really opened the door, and then it's pretty clear that, within reason, you're interested in knowing who's coming through, and why, and how.

DS: Yes. I want to hear! I think there's going to be a lot of people coming through.

RZ: Alright, well thank you so much, Darcey.

DS: Thank you.

RZ: [Outro]: You've been listening to episode eighty-three of *Commonplace* with Darcey Steinke. I'm your host, Rachel Zucker. This episode was sound edited by Jay Hammond

and produced by me, Jay Hammond, Doreen Wang, and Christine Larusso. Many thanks to Grove Books, Sarah Crichton books, NYRB Books and Verso books. Thank you to our patrons: you make Commonplace possible. And to all of you who send us encouraging messages, especially Eleanor Smagarinsky from Australia. The music you're hearing was composed and performed by Judah Darwin Zucker Goren. Thank you for listening.

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