

MARY FARRAR

"This above all, to thine own self be true." Mary Farrar says her father used to repeat this line from Hamlet to her and "I've tried to live by it."

Mary is a relentlessly positive person who says "I've had a blessed life. Every day I wake up just so grateful for another day. My son-in-law says I find a silver lining in everything."

But it hasn't always been easy.

Mary is the daughter of John Thomas, an Englishman, and Harriet Tompkins from New York City. They met in Paris and eventually landed in Toronto where John became a philosophy prof at U. of T. Mary grew up in the privileged enclave of Rosedale and studied art and archeology at U. of T. She worked on a number of digs including one at the fortress of Louisbourg in Cape Breton.

But during university Mary became pregnant. In those days "a child out of wedlock was unthinkable. It would have brought shame on my family." Mary's mother took her to Denmark where abortion was legal, but Mary's pregnancy was too far advanced and she had to remain there on her own far from home to have the child, a girl, who was given up for adoption.

(35 years later the phone rang at the Thomas home in Rosedale and a woman's voice said "Do you know who I am?" Indeed it was Mary's daughter, Hannah, calling from Denmark, now 35 and a mother herself. As it happened, Mary was travelling in Europe with her family and she was soon reunited with the daughter she'd had to give up so long ago. "She lived in the hippie neighbourhood in Christiana and was a free spirit," says Mary. "Like me." They've since been back and forth for visits a number of times and, inspired by Mary, Hannah has become a teacher.)

So some stories have happy endings. "We have a nice relationship now," says Mary. "But at the time this experience

affected me profoundly. Overnight I rejected the Victorian values I'd grown up with and determined to devote my life to nature, the arts, and the pursuit of social equity -- with a dash of adventure thrown in."

Although she certainly doesn't seem shy now, Mary says she was painfully shy growing up and it's been a life long struggle to overcome this affliction. As a child she studied dance with Betty Oliphant and danced in the Wayne and Shuster Christmas pantomimes and with the Canadian Opera Company. "Dance was my salvation because I was too shy to talk to people. I'm still no good at small talk."

Indeed Mary might have become a professional dancer. She was invited to join the National Ballet "but I was told I didn't have the body for a prima ballerina. I'd be limited to character parts, supporting roles. So I quit. Cold turkey."

Mary didn't dance again for over half a century, but in her 70's she decided to try out for a musical version of a Christmas Carol. "We made our entrance doing back somersaults down the aisle at the Grand. And there I was on stage, this white haired lady in a kick line with a bunch of kids." She went on to perform in a community show at the Tett Centre for three summers directed by celebrated dancer Peggy Baker. "It was awesome," says Mary. "Dancing is still in my blood."

And ironically, although she rejected that supporting role in ballet, her life has been a succession of supporting roles - selflessly helping others and supporting a countless array of causes.

In some ways Mary was an odd mix of the conventional and the unconventional. She was a debutante who had her coming out party at the Granite Club. And while on a European trip with the Bishop Strachan School choir she was actually presented to the Queen Mother at Buckingham Palace. "I remember a garden party

with cute Dukes in morning coats and delicious iced coffee in demi tasse cups." This is the same woman who now refuses to have indoor plumbing in her cottage on Otter Lake.

At B.S.S. the girls were taught that their role in life was to become the wives and helpmeets of important men. And Mary didn't shed every vestige of this upbringing. "I turned 24 and back then you had to get married by 25 or you'd be doomed to be an old maid. So I had to find a husband," says Mary. "I just had to make sure he wasn't too socially acceptable."

"So I went to a banquet of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. I thought it might be a good place to meet an appropriately inappropriate man. We stood to sing the Cuban National Anthem and this guy smiled at me. I didn't want anything to do with him. I'd had it with short guys. They're always over compensating. And Edward was 5'4! But he asked me to dance and something clicked."

But it was hardly smooth sailing. Edward was in the midst of getting divorced and gaining custody of two 5-year-old boys. "The first time he came to our house my father shut the door in his face and told me to get rid of him. So obviously I'd succeeded in finding a socially unacceptable man. And when my parents discovered Edward was brilliant - he had a Ph.D. in Geophysics - they gradually came around."

And something clicked indeed. They were married for 54 years. While being a mom to Edward's twins Ross and Scott, Mary had two more children, Jean and Andrew, who live in Kingston along with four grandchildren. And for all she's done, Mary says her family has been the most important thing in her life. "Being a mom has been my greatest joy."

Edward joined the Geology Department at Queen's and the family settled on a hobby farm in Inverary. They had a large organic garden and raised pigs, sheep, chickens, and ducks. Mary

took particular pleasure in cooking with vegetables straight from the garden and canning and freezing preserves for the winter. Each year they hosted a legendary student welcoming party with a homegrown pig roasted on a spit, and singing around a huge bonfire.

A highlight came every seven years with Edward's sabbaticals. "We had fantastic, round-the-world trips," says Mary, "Australia, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Iran, South Africa, South America, and more. We'd travel with literally the clothes on our back.

"We just had Edward's half salary so we'd do it on the cheap, hitchhiking, sleeping on beaches or graveyards, even in brothels. We'd buy shrimp from local fishermen and cook them on the beach. We ate oysters out of the ocean, baked potatoes on a live volcano in Hawaii. I'd much rather do that than stay in a fancy hotel or go to a fancy restaurant.

"This was before mass tourism. In many places white people travelling with children were a curiosity. People would see us and invite us into their homes. It was amazing."

Was she ever scared? "No. Well, maybe once," admits Mary. "We were in Papua New Guinea sleeping in our car when we woke up to find ourselves surrounded by local tribesmen. They said we had to come with them right away or "rascals will come and spoil your bodies." I had no idea what that meant, but this was the land of shrunken heads and cannibals and it didn't sound good. But they took us to a residence to sleep, and their chief in a loin cloth stood guarding us all night - so we escaped with our heads. I'm still not sure who the "rascals" were, but I was glad to get out of there."

They'd also take rough camping trips around Ontario. "We'd take a side road off the highway," remembers Mary. "And then another till we'd find a farmer's field. We'd throw down a

plastic sheet and sleeping bags for the night, and be up and away at sunrise before anyone knew we'd been there. It wasn't a hardship. It was fun. Our adventures bound us together."

Mary is best known now as a community activist, but that side of her blossomed later in life. Before that she had a variety of careers. "Each decade seemed to offer exciting new possibilities."

After university Mary became an elementary school teacher in Toronto's inner city and then at Kingscourt Public in Kingston. Following that she was an educational consultant with the Limestone Board and lectured at Queen's Faculty of Education. She completed a Masters in Education at Queen's, and at 40 earned a PhD from U. Of T. in Sociolinguistics, the study of human communication. "Because of my battle with shyness I was always interested in how people communicate, how we talk to children in particular."

Unable to find work in her field in Kingston, Mary changed focus and became Community Co-ordinator of Frontenac College's Prison Literacy Initiative. This involved training volunteers to teach basic literary skills in Kingston's prisons. Mary also worked in drug and alcohol counselling in the prisons and taught Adult Education courses at St. Lawrence College.

In her fifties Mary returned to teaching in a two room school on Amherst Island, also coaching sports, teaching dance and producing musicals. "I loved all aspects of teaching," she says.

In 2010, after decades on their Inverary farm, Mary and Edward moved into Kingston and quickly became involved in their Inner Harbour community. They joined the Old Farts Cycling Club, although Mary is anything but an "old fart". She revived the moribund Friends of Kingston Inner Harbour Association, and set to work to establish a cycling trail around the Inner Harbour

and extend the K&P trail. She organized award-winning community events, including a Wheelchair Rally and Kingston's first street art festival on the wall by Doug Fluhrer Park.

Most notably, Mary's group led the fight to block the Wellington Street extension, which would have driven a busy road through the waterfront park. "It was completely inappropriate," says Mary. "Like an idea out of the dark ages of thruways and car culture."

While working to save the park, Mary discovered that the area was teeming with turtles. They found over 100 nests. "I was blown away," she exclaims. "Who would have imagined there were so many turtles there!"

Mary organized a group of 50 volunteers to protect the turtle nests, even using radio telemetry to monitor the turtles' movements. And, ever practical, Mary marshalled the turtles in the fight against the Wellington St. extension. "The turtles became our allies." It's hard for a developer to argue against turtles, and this fight now appears to have been won. And Mary will be forever known as The Turtle Lady.

As Mary delved into turtles, "I learned how important they are in native culture. This led to me forging a deep connection with Kingston's indigenous community." Mary became involved with protecting Belle Island, a sacred indigenous site. When the Belle Island Caretakers' Council received a First Peoples Proclamation award in 2019, Mary was honoured to be chosen to accept the award.

Mary's group also engaged Algonquin Traditional Knowledge Keeper Chuck Commanda for a community build of a traditional birch bark canoe. Two thirds of the participants were Indigenous and one third non-Indigenous, and Mary feels the project was a meaningful coming together in the spirit of Truth and Reconciliation. The beautiful canoe is now at Kingston's

Alternative Indigenous school where the kids have been inspired to make paddles and get out on the water.

Unfortunately, during this time Edward began to suffer from worsening dementia and had to be institutionalized. After he could no longer communicate, Mary would visit him with her brother John and sing to him - old standards he liked like Blue Skies. And she could still see the hint of a smile.

When Edward died in 2020 Mary decided on a green burial. Edward was buried in a simple cotton shroud, no embalming fluid, no fancy casket. "Edward was an environmentalist who cared deeply about nature," says Mary. "He always wanted to give more than he took and this just felt right. Besides, he always hated funerals."

Green burials have now become another of Mary's causes. "All of that formaldehyde from embalming fluid going into the drinking water can't be good. Giving your body back to the earth is just more environmentally sound, kind of a last gift to the land."

The movie of her life could be titled "The Many Different Lives of Mary Farrar", but there are consistent threads running through it. As a six-year-old Mary would take her dolls to the ravine behind her house and sit there communing with nature. And to this day a deep, almost spiritual connection to nature, to the earth and its creatures, is central to her life. "It's innate," says Mary.

Although she's over 80, Mary remains as active as ever. She's on the city's working group on Sir John A. Macdonald, and she's recently bought a house in the Fruit Belt and has a ten year plan to renovate it. Yes, that means she'll be over 90 when she moves in, but that doesn't faze her. And she still takes hour-long swims around their cottage island "even the swampy parts. It's wonderful."

So what keeps her going? "At my advanced age?" she laughs. "I just get fulfillment from serving others." Asked to name her greatest accomplishment, she demurs. "It's not about personal accomplishment. It's about trying to make my tiny corner of the globe a better place."

A few years ago, Mary produced her own show on Cogeco TV, interviewing interesting seniors. So things have come full circle, because Mary is nothing if not an "interesting senior." And she's not done yet. "Who knows what adventures still lie in store."

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Doug Bowie

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