

# Eight Kinds of Strength

The Sweet Little Old Gray-Haired Lady in Sneakers[1] I am a  
woman,  
a lesbian,  
a poet,  
poor,  
handicapped,  
radical,  
Indian,  
over seventy –  
an eight-time loser.

How shall I not be  
a revolutionary?

How shall I not see  
my sister in every woman,  
my brother in any man,  
my child to cherish in every child?

When they dragged Jane Kennedy into solitary  
that was my arm the cops were twisting.

When they dropped napalm on the rice paddies  
that was my skin on fire,  
that was my blood running out hot and sticky.

Goddess,  
give me eight kinds of strength to fight back.

I FIRST READ THIS 1979 POEM by Valerie Taylor at the Gerber/Hart Library in Chicago in the winter of 2003. I was visiting from New York to gather information on the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), the first lesbian rights organization in the United States. Started in San Francisco in 1955 by four

lesbian couples including Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin, the DOB had organized chapters in Los Angeles, New York and Chicago by 1961, and I was at Gerber/Hart to see what I could learn about local members. Karen Sendziak, the tireless and extremely knowledgeable archivist at Gerber/Hart, had pointed me toward Valerie Taylor's papers.

Seated at a small desk in the library's main room that cold Saturday afternoon, with women and men streaming in and out to borrow books, drop off donations, check out a photography exhibit, or meet friends, I delighted both in the feeling of being in the midst of a vibrant gay community and in my discovery of the extent of Taylor's life and work – as a Daughter and beyond. I had already known that, as "Velma Tate," she had joined DOB in Chicago in 1962 and contributed articles to the group's national magazine *The Ladder*. What I learned while at Gerber/Hart was that she served as secretary to the local board of DOB in 1962-63 and appeared on Chicago radio shows with other Daughters. She also helped start one of the most significant gay groups of the 1960s, *Mattachine Midwest*, with the love of her life, Pearl Hart. Hart (1890-1975) was an outstanding civil rights lawyer and advocate for activists of all sorts in Chicago, a founder of the National Lawyers Guild. They met when Taylor was 50 and Hart was 73.

"In the summer of 1965 two events in Chicago heralded the end of the McCarthy era," Taylor wrote in "Notes from a Lesbian Grandmother," her weekly column in *Mattachine Midwest's* newsletter. "The last HUAC hearings in the United States were held here, with Pearl Hart representing two of the defendants; this was the famous hearing at which Dr. Jeremiah Stamler and Yolands Hall were exonerated." The second event she noted was the formation of *Mattachine Midwest*, which celebrated its 15th anniversary in 1980. It lasted until 1986.[2]

But chronicling Taylor's involvement with the gay rights

movement was one thing; finding "The Sweet Little Old Gray-Haired Lady in Sneakers" was another. It was a sight for my sore eyes after hours of deciphering fading meeting minutes and blurry mimeographed newsletters. I loved the title of the poem, a sarcastic commentary on the refusal by 1970s periodical Mother Earth to run gay or lesbian announcements because the editors did not want to alienate the "sweet little old gray-haired ladies in sneakers" who read their magazine, assuming them to be heterosexual.[3] And I especially appreciated Taylor's poetic ability to "perform intersectionality" at a time when it was just called "being a radical feminist."

Her references to "napalm" and "rice paddies" were immediately recognizable, but I will admit now that I had to look up "Jane Kennedy" – the name rang a bell deep in the recesses of the activist side of my brain, but I couldn't remember exactly which act had caused her imprisonment. Through the Internet, I found a moving testimony written in 1975 by the legendary Dorothy Day and published in The Catholic Worker. Day visited Kennedy – as well as Puerto Rican Nationalist leader Lolita Lebrun – at Alderson Federal Prison in West Virginia that year. She reported, "The political prisoners, Jane Kennedy and Lolita Le Brun (sic), were there. Jane, for fouling up a computer (I don't know how to explain it) and also for destroying draft files in Indianapolis, was sentenced to three years on each count, the sentences to be served concurrently . . . I had not met Jane before, and was much impressed by her. A loving, sensitive person, she has suffered much." The experience led Day to recall, "I have seen the inside of many prisons, the first time in Washington during the suffrage demonstrations, where I saw my cell mate, one of the leaders, strung up to the bars of the cell door, chained there by her wrists for three hours. Our sleepless night on a single cot with no blanket in that Occaquan punishment cell was lightened by a long conversation with Lucy Burns, a school teacher in Brooklyn. We talked not about suffrage or prisons, but about

the novels of Joseph Conrad." [4]

That sent me off on a tangent to learn more about Dorothy Day's prison experiences as well as Jane Kennedy's, and to understand how Lolita Lebrun also ended up at Alderson Federal Prison. This sort of "off site" exploration happened repeatedly when researching Valerie Taylor, as a reference of hers would motivate me to dig deeper into the complexities of her life and the lives of her close friends and collaborators.

Taylor was born Velma Nacella Young on September 7, 1913 in Aurora, Illinois to a family of "independent Midwestern farmers" and feminists. As she told Tee Corinne and Caroline Overman in 1988, "I had a great-grandmother who marched in the first suffrage parade in Elgin, Illinois with my father, who was then a baby, strapped to her back."<sup>5</sup> An undiagnosed case of polio left her with pronounced curvature of the spine, an obvious "widow's hump" which contributed to her sense of herself as unattractive but did not interfere with her success as a student. Extremely poor eyesight almost did, until it was discovered and she was given eyeglasses in high school. She graduated in 1930 and then, "after five Depression years on the farm with no hope of further education,"<sup>6</sup> received a one-year scholarship to Blackburn College in Carlinville, Illinois. Taylor's time at Blackburn – from which she graduated in 1937 after many interruptions to earn money to continue her studies – shaped her politically:

"Perhaps the outstanding faculty member was the Reverend Richard Rasmussen . . . he preached (and lived) what was then known as the Social Gospel. It was the era of A. J. Muste, Willard Uphaus, John Haynes Holmes, and Kagawa. Christianity for them, and for many of us, involved an end to war, poverty, and racism." [7]

She not only attended classes but went to Socialist meetings and farm sales, and joined local picket lines. As she

explained it later, "From there into feminism, the civil rights movement, and the struggle for international peace was a logical step." [8]

Hers was a political sensibility I resonated with. I, too, had come from a working-class background that included Midwestern roots; struggled to earn a college degree and worked continuously through undergraduate and graduate school; saw myself as a socialist feminist and was shaped by the civil rights struggle well before "becoming" a lesbian. Taylor also was a counterpoint to the stereotypical lesbian activist of the 1950s and 1960s. Many of the leaders of DOB, as well as lesbians active in allied organizations at that time, described themselves as conventional except for their sexual nonconformity and were seen as politically liberal at best. Taylor, however, was an out and proud radical whose lesbianism was incorporated into her passion for social justice, just as the poverty and physical disabilities of her youth shaped her worldview as an adult. Her radicalism also provided a delicious complement to her success as one of the first, and best, of the era's lesbian pulp fiction writers.

Taylor's talent for creating believable characters, her sly sense of humor, and (not for nothing) her descriptive scenes of lesbian sex and romance insured a steady readership of both women and men. She was one of the handful of female published paperback writers and one of the very few who were openly lesbian.

SHE BEGAN PUBLISHING POETRY in 1946 using variations of her birth name while being trapped in a bad marriage to William "Jerry" Tate and raising three young sons. She placed over 200 poems in periodicals ranging from *Baptist Leader* to the *Ladies Home Journal* and the *New York Herald Tribune* from then until her death in 1997. She sold "true confession" stories for \$100 each in 1950 and her first novel – *Hired Girl* – in 1952; she used the proceeds to find a new home for herself and her sons

and to begin divorce proceedings against Tate, whom she had married in 1939. But it was the newly-lucrative paperback originals market that gave her career as a writer a boost.

From 1957 to 1964, as Valerie Taylor, she published seven lesbian-themed novels with increasingly bold titles: *Whisper Their Love* (1957), *The Girls in 3-B* (1959), *Stranger on Lesbos* (1960), *Return to Lesbos* (1963), *Unlike Others* (1963), *A World Without Men* (1963), and *Journey to Fulfillment* (1964). Two of them – *Whisper Their Love* and *Stranger on Lesbos* – were published as hardback editions in London. As Katherine V. Forrest, herself a revered lesbian novelist who was first published in the 1980s, wrote recently, Taylor "was perhaps the first of our pulp writers to be relatively open and visible, leaving her marriage and conventional life to live in the gay area of Chicago." [9] Taylor joined the tiny ranks of openly lesbian and gay novelists and nonfiction writers whose works could be found in leftist and avant-garde bookstores as well as on the paperback racks of drugstores and bus stations.

Excerpt from Taylor's *Return to Lesbos*:

"Here were the Ann Bannon books side-by-side with Jeannette Foster's *Sex Variant Women in Literature*; *North Beach Girl* and *Take Me Home* next to the Covici-Friede edition of *The Well of Loneliness*, dated 1928. Here, huddled together as though for warmth in an unfriendly world, were Gore Vidal and a tall thin volume of Baudelaire, translated by someone she had never heard of. Here were books in the field, for people with a special interest, a special orientation." [10]

As Francine Davenport, Taylor also published a heterosexual novel, the *Secret of the Bayou*, in 1967, which was translated into French and Dutch. "I had been in the hospital and needed to make some money in a hurry," she recalled, "so I wrote a Gothic." [11] She also had learned after her divorce that "one doesn't have to be good-looking or young, or even un-

handicapped, to be sexually attractive" and her poems as well as novels reflect male and female lovers during her life. She admitted to one interviewer that she "always had a weakness for weak men and strong women." [12] Her passionate 11-year relationship with Pearl Hart certainly proved the latter.

Taylor began collaborating with Chicago writer and publisher Marie Kuda in 1968 and the two women founded, with three others, the Lesbian Writers' Conference in Chicago in 1974. Throughout the first half of the 1970s, Taylor wrote for local alternative newspapers on a variety of subjects; after Hart's death in 1975, she moved to Margaretville, New York to live with old friends from Blackburn. She continued participating in annual Lesbian Writers' Conference gatherings back in Chicago and kept writing: she had two new novels published by feminist pioneer publisher Naiad Press under the direction of her longtime associate from DOB and *The Ladder*, Barbara Grier. Naiad also republished three of her earlier lesbian pulp fiction works, now classics.

In 1979, Taylor moved to Tucson, Arizona in search of warmer weather and continued to write for local publications. She also continued to be politically active. Taylor wrote that the gay community center, Casa Nuestra, as well as the local Quaker meeting she joined, "made Tucson more than welcome to me." She found a new lover, never publicly named, in 1982, when she was nearly 70 years old.

Interviewed by Studs Terkel in 1995, two years before she died, for his book *Coming of Age*, Taylor described a life full of passion, politics, good food and friendships, and good work. As an artist as well as a lifelong activist for peace and justice, a gay Gray Panther, she ultimately embodied the "sweet little old gray-haired lady in sneakers" who never stopped believing in the transformative power of love and revolution.

## Footnotes

1. Poem by Valerie Taylor, in Jeannette Foster and Valerie Taylor, *Two Women: The Poetry of Jeannette Foster and Valerie Taylor* ( Chicago: Womanpress, 1976)
2. Valerie Taylor, "The Early Years of Mattachine Midwest," reprinted from the *Mattachine Midwest Newsletter* April/May, 1980 in Tee A. Corinne, *Valerie Taylor: A Resource Book*, 1999; published by the Estate of Valerie Taylor.
3. Tee Corinne, *A Valerie Taylor Resource Book*, 6.
4. Dorothy Day, *The Catholic Worker*, 1975. See also Clare Hanrahan, *Jailed for Justice: A Woman's Guide to Federal Prison Camp*. Celtic Wordcraft, 2007.
5. Tee Corinne and Caroline Overman, "Valerie Taylor Interview," *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*, #25: Winter 1988, 64.
6. Valerie Taylor, "Autobiography," 1991; 4-5. Gerber/Hart Library, Chicago, IL.
7. Ibid, 14.
8. Ibid., 11.
9. Katherine V. Forrest, *Lesbian Pulp Fiction: The Sexually Intrepid World of Lesbian Paperback Novels 1950-1965*. San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2005, xi.
10. Excerpt from Valerie Taylor's *Return to Lesbos* reprinted in Forrest, *Lesbian Pulp Fiction*, 156.
11. Tee Corinne, *A Valerie Taylor Resource Book*, 5.
12. Ibid.