

Nancy Allen
Interviewed by Nancy Taylor
The Evergreen State College oral history project
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Final

Taylor: We didn't talk very much about what you expected when you came to Evergreen, and what you found, in terms of what the college was going to be. One of the things Sam said people should talk about is what they expected, what they found, and how it changed, in terms of atmosphere, in terms of philosophy, in terms of people, in terms of students. Any way you want to talk about that.

Allen: Okay. Well, I came to Evergreen under considerable pressure, because I had no job. I only applied after getting fired from my previous job. I only applied for two jobs. One was Evergreen, and the other was Richard Stockton State College in New Jersey, which was a brand-new, innovative state college that was opening the same year as Evergreen.

My thinking was that if I didn't get either one of those two jobs, I would go start a free school with a bunch of friends. I was just in the mood to totally drop out of education, if I couldn't be involved in changing it in some way.

I really needed a job, and I certainly didn't expect the sexism that I found. But I don't think I had many expectations. I got fired on the same day I learned that Evergreen was even a possibility. Because I had already applied, I had already sent my stuff off, but I wasn't at all thinking about it on the day I got fired. And then, I was talking to Claire Hess, who was the person from Evergreen, that very evening, so I didn't have time to build up a lot of expectations. I guess my expectations were mostly formed by the people I met from the college.

Taylor: But you knew nothing about Evergreen?

Allen: Well, yes, I did. I knew that it was going to have some kind of team teaching, or at least I thought it was, and I had already been doing team teaching. Let's see, what else did I know? I may have known about written evaluations, which we did not have at my prior place, the place I got fired from. So, I certainly expected team teaching. I think I had heard, in some publications or something, about no grades.

I did not know that the entire planning faculty was male. I did not know about that controversy. And I was extremely surprised when I found that to be true, because my prior teaching experience had a

much better ratio between men and women. There were a lot of women teachers at Virginia Wesleyan, which was this funky, conservative little place. So I was extremely surprised by that.

Taylor: How did that play out, when you actually got here? The sexism?

Allen: Well, it played out in that I was teaching with Dick Jones—I was in Dick Jones's program—and he was a Freudian psychologist. He, in my mind, had a very traditional view of the world, based on Freudian psychology, although apparently, he was really far out in that he didn't think there needed to be any set curriculum at all. He apparently thought that teaching anything was as good as teaching anything else.

Apparently, he thought that one of the main things that happened was that when you were in college, you learned to respect authority, and get along with authority, and know what authority was, and eventually, have authority. I mean, I think that's what he may have thought. Also, he told me numerous times that authority emanated from father figures. I kept wondering, well, okay, if you have to be a father figure to have this thing, which is so important in being a professor, how can you do that when you're a woman?

He was either completely incognizant of what the importance of that was, or didn't think there was any difference; thought a mother figure was the same as a father figure, which I can hardly believe. At any rate, he didn't take my questioning at all seriously, or help me at all to figure out how I could have authority. And it was a very big problem. I talked last time about the very beginning of the Human Development program, the retreat where students had basically used me as the victim of their Outward Bound experience, and thrown me over a log. And then, picked me up in the middle of the night, carried me off bodily to sleep with them. And so, I was already being pushed around by students, so I really needed to have authority, and I really needed to understand how to have it.

The men on the team were absolutely no help at all. You were also on the team. Both of us were on the team of Human Development, and neither one of us talked, hardly at all. We just sat there and let the guys talk. I don't know, that was very difficult.

Taylor: Was your relationship, during that first year, pretty confined to the team, or did you have relationships with people on other teams, and in the college as a whole? Or, did you feel like you were shoved into this team, and this team was pretty much your whole life?

Allen: Yeah, I did. I felt like I was shoved into this team, which I didn't approve of. I didn't like what they were doing, I didn't like the books, and I would have never wanted to be there. When I was hired, I thought—this is one of my expectations—I thought that the planning faculty knew that I already had

experience doing team teaching; that I was interested in women's studies, and had already taught some. I thought I was being hired because I already had some experience they needed, so I thought I would be part of a planning process, and I would help plan this new program we were teaching. But when I arrived, I found that, of all the programs, that program was one that was already set in stone.

Taylor: That's true.

Allen: So I was really insulted that I didn't get to have any input, and I didn't like what was happening, and I wasn't getting any support. But I never thought about leaving, or anything like that.

Anyway, the question was, who did I know? The person I knew the best was Chuck Pailthorp, who was another person on the team. He lived right down the road from me, and I knew him and his wife, Mickie, and their kids. They were probably the friends that I had.

And then, my boyfriend, in the winter, after fall quarter was over—I guess around New Year's, or maybe even in February, because I don't remember exactly when the semester system broke—but my boyfriend came to town, and was living with me. That made things a lot better. I remember we had a party called "Help Us Make Friends" party, or something like that. We invited a bunch of people we thought we wanted to be friends with. I didn't really feel socially isolated, but then, I've never been a person with a huge social circle.

Taylor: Do you remember having conversations with either the other women, or other people, about the situation in terms of sexism, in terms of educational philosophy, in terms of how students should be treated, in terms of how the college was going?

Allen: No, I'm surprised. I'm actually surprised at how completely unconscious I was about a lot of this stuff. I can't remember when . . . there was one year . . . the year that I remember something really feminist coming from a bunch of faculty women was when Llyn De Danaan was dean. I don't know what year that happened. But it happened in my house, so I kind of remember that really well.

I actually also felt quite put down by some of the women—well, specifically, scientists—and there were some women scientists on the faculty early on. They seemed to really think that science was just the best of all possible fields, and they really didn't have any . . . well, some of them may have, but they certainly weren't showing it . . . much concept of interdisciplinary studies involving science.

I felt like I was all into learning about the students, and helping the students at their level, and figuring out what the students were up to, and adapting the curriculum to the students, and the science women were all about "We are doing astrophysics." And if they had any issues as women, it was all about how we have to prove we can do astrophysics just as well as the guys can.

So, I didn't only feel like I was getting a rough shake from the men. I also felt like that I didn't have common cause with all of the women.

Taylor: Do you remember common cause with the students? Or, do you remember what was going on in the '70s about—well, I think of it in terms of consciousness-raising groups, and meeting with women, and meeting with students.

Allen: Yeah, I did know. I was the person who did it.

Taylor: That's what I wondered. And how receptive were people to it, and how much resistance was at Evergreen, and how much of a leader was Evergreen in doing that outreach?

Allen: Evergreen was absolutely no leader in any of it. I don't see Evergreen as having lifted a finger in that direction.

Taylor: Did that ever change?

Allen: No, I don't think really it changed. But I think what happened was—I don't know how, it may have been in a small number of individual actions over a long period of time—but ultimately, I felt like women took over the school. [laughter]

Taylor: How did that happen? I think that's true.

Allen: But it certainly didn't happen as a group effort, I don't think. I don't know. Maybe you know more about it than I do. But I remember the time that I thought women had taken over the school was probably when Sally Cloninger was . . . I think she was Convener of Expressive Arts maybe? I don't know what her actual position was. But she was also teaching film. She was the teacher of film. All of these students wanted to work in Hollywood, and wanted to do film, and she was being very feminist about the kinds of videos she made. Apparently, women in her classes were expressing a lot of feminism. It was kind of difficult for the men sometimes in her classes, I kind of heard, and I thought, well, wow! Good! Finally we have a critical mass, and finally there's something really important going on that women are running around here.

But I think it was always . . . the women didn't have any—except for the Women's Center, which was for students, and where I would go to hang out, and have consciousness-raising groups—except for that, there was no focal point for the women to be getting together. One of the things that Evergreen always has been, you feel like you're married to your faculty team, because you have to work so hard to drum up the programs new every time and all that. So you're working really hard with a little group of people, and you get to know those people really well. But you don't have much cross-campus

connection, except for faculty meetings. And the faculty meetings are not a place to have a women's subcommittee, probably.

Taylor: Can you remember enough to describe what happened when you had the meeting at your house with LLyn De Danaan, when LLyn was dean? It was a support group, as I remember it.

Allen: Yes, it was. But I don't remember what the issue was. I just remember that LLyn—who is very dramatic, by the way—just said, “I'm going to resign the deanship. I'm dean now, and I hate it, and they're doing the wrong thing in this and this and this way. I'm going to get out of here, unless you guys support me.” [laughing]

Taylor: I remember that. She was what was called a “baby” dean, or a “little” dean.

Allen: Oh, my god. I'd forgotten that.

Taylor: They had the deans, and then the first baby dean was Oscar Soule, and LLyn, in my memory, was the second. She was treated horribly. She was treated as . . .

Allen: . . . baby dean.

Taylor: She was treated as a servant to the deans. As I remember it, she did not have equal authority.

Allen: Wow.

Taylor: And she blew up. I think there must have been 30 people at that meeting, or 40.

Allen: Yeah, there were. Yes, it was a huge meeting.

Taylor: And it was an airing of grievance. I remember it as really being significant. Also, after that, we had meetings at Kathleen O'Shaughnessy and Pat Labine's house. And we had meetings at Janet Ott's house. I remember there were a bunch of meetings. Maybe it was eight, 10 years in, though. It didn't happen right away. But it started with LLyn.

Allen: I don't remember these other meetings. The only thing I remember is a pizza group. Thursday night pizza at what's now Brewery City Pizza. I thought it was just a social get-together, but a lot of science women would go. That's where I got to know K. V. Ladd. She was not as bad about astrophysics [laughing] as some of the other scientists were.

Taylor: Did you ever seek out and teach with other women, because that's what you wanted? I know you taught with Alice Nelson a lot, and that was natural because you were both doing Spanish—

Allen: Yeah. I was sought out. Let's put it that way. I was sought out a lot by other women. I was sought out by Peta Henderson and Stephanie Coontz, because they wanted somebody who knew some Marxism, and wasn't going to give them a bunch of crap about Marxism all the time, I think, but

somebody who could do a different thing from exactly what they did. I didn't seek them out, but that was a good thing. Usually, I wasn't the active partner in doing the seeking, I don't think.

But I did teach—I mean, this is one of the things that made me comfortable, I suppose—I did teach on a whole bunch of all-women teams. I wish I remembered exactly when this was. I remember that—oh, I know what it was. There was a period where the deans seemed to be concerned that there be a gender balance on teams; that the teams should be half-men and half-women, or something like that, or as close to that as possible. And they didn't want all-women teams, or all-men teams.

One friend of mine had an absolutely terrible experience being the one woman on, I think, a team with three men. It was just a terrible experience. And so she started saying, "I want to work with women." And a few other women started trying to work with women. All of a sudden, there's all kinds of all-woman teams just everywhere. And somehow, we overrode the deans' reservations about it, and it became really possible to have all-women teams. It must have gone along with a big increase in the percentage of women on the faculty. But in my latter years there, I taught—and you and I taught this—

Taylor: We taught with Argentina Daley. That was a three-women . . .

Allen: Yeah, but we taught in this other program with Elizabeth Williamson and Kathleen Eamon.

Taylor: Oh, I wasn't in that team.

Allen: Oh, you weren't. Jin Darney was.

Taylor: I was in the team called Friendship, with you and Jin and Elizabeth.

Allen: Right.

Taylor: That was really recently. That was just after I retired.

Allen: Oh, after you retired?

Taylor: That first year, yeah.

Allen: Yeah, so I must have retired later than you.

Taylor: Here's another topic that has to do with how the college was run. I mean, you said something about the deans wanted balanced teams or something, and they didn't support these all-women teams. So how did you see the relationship between the faculty and the deans, and what the faculty role was at the college? There's a lot of conversation about who runs the college.

Allen: Right.

Taylor: And whether the deans have some grand plan, and run it, or whether the faculty have autonomy and do as they please; whether specialty areas, or how that whole thing of not departments, but some kind of groupings happened, and how you were affected by that.

Allen: Yeah.

Taylor: And what leadership the faculty provided, or didn't provide. Just how the whole college worked, in your mind.

Allen: [Laughing] Don't ask me! Let me see. It was clear—this is one thing I don't remember, but in the beginning, I think all of the deans were faculty who rotated into the deanship, or something. Or, maybe those were the baby deans and the senior deans. I don't know. But there was a time when—I'm sure there were years when every single dean had been a faculty member. There was a term, when you were a dean, and then you had to rotate out, and rotate back into the faculty.

Taylor: It's still true.

Allen: Okay, well, that's good. [laughing] Because that was one thing I liked about it.

Taylor: I think that's still true.

Allen: There came a time when there was a different kind of dean. Like wasn't Barbara hired as a dean?

Taylor: Barbara Smith and John Perkins were the only exception that I know of that were hired as deans. John Perkins went back and joined the faculty; Barbara never did. But that's the only time, as far as I can remember.

Allen: Okay. Anyway, if you had that sort of a deanship, if you have a team with new people rotating in, maybe every year—every other year, probably, every two years. If you have something like that, you can't have a plan to run the college, and make it always be the same.

Taylor: Was that good?

Allen: Yeah, I think it was good. I liked that. I didn't want the college to always be the same. That's what gave faculty—I mean, in that sense, that's the way faculty ran the place was becoming deans. And then, it depended on the person. Like maybe a person is really hard-nosed, and wants it to be a certain way, or maybe a person really likes you or me or whoever, and promotes me or you or whoever.

Taylor: How did your teaching, I guess, your assignments, or your teaching choices, come about? Was it mostly because you just got together with a group of people and said, "Let's do this"? Or, did someone ask you to do this? Or, did you feel an obligation to do this?

Allen: All different things. Mostly, it was other faculty would call me up and say, "We're going to do a program on X. Are you interested in having a meeting with us?"

When I wanted to do something, I would usually teach by myself. Like when I decided I needed to develop a Spanish language program, the first time I did it, I did it all by myself. And then [sighs] I've learned a few things. Actually, from these interviews, I've learned about some of the stuff about

language teaching, about some of the college's attitudes toward language teaching, which were incredibly stupid. They were so stupid, and so retrograde, that it is almost impossible to believe. I was the only language teacher on the faculty the first year. The only teacher of any language. I don't know how they let me be there. It was not because I was a language teacher; it was because I had all this other experience. But basically, they intended to have no languages.

Taylor: Did you and Susan Fiksdal ever talk about language?

Allen: Yeah, after—yeah . . .

Taylor: Because she was part-time the first year.

Allen: . . . about seven years in. Anyway, when [sighs]—yeah, when I was teaching my own material—which, I would say, was usually women's studies, or something involving Spanish language—then I would do it myself first. Sometimes it would turn out well, and be popular, and then there would need to be somebody else to do it with me. That happened a couple of times in women's studies, but mostly, it happened in language.

Taylor: And you were an advocate for language. At some point, we hired Alice Nelson, and we hired Evelia Romano. You had some significant role in our moving in that direction, it seems like.

Allen: Yeah.

Taylor: Because of your role in hiring, but also, in choice of hire.

Allen: Yeah. But also, another significant thing is that Patrick Hill's hiring priorities were very specific to him, and very autocratic, in certain ways. But he imposed a foreign studies dean—an international studies dean—on the institution. We had no international students. There was no reason for an international studies dean, but all of a sudden, Patrick decides that he has to hire an international studies dean, so he did. It turned out to be Jose Gomez.

Once Jose Gomez was there, and was a dean, believe me, it was a lot easier to get stuff about Spanish done. [laughing] I don't know if he ever specifically intervened, but you just couldn't badmouth language differences and language learning around Jose Gomez very easily. I always have to be grateful to Patrick for doing that, also because Jose was a really wonderful friend of mine.

The story of Alice and Evelia is that Alice or Evelia needed to be hired, because we were going to do—my program was called Spanish Forms, and then it was going to be called Hispanic Forms. Only it was terrible when it was called Hispanic Forms, because any Latinos wouldn't come because they hated the term Hispanic, because it was a Ronald Reagan term, and they would have none of it. So, it was a

terrible mistake to call it Hispanic Forms. Although, Hispanic was the proper form, because it's the only word that really combines Spain and Latin America, and that's what the program was about.

Taylor: Who came up with the term?

Allen: I came up with the term. When I taught it by myself, it was Spanish Forms, and it was about Spain, and it was not about Latin America. But when it was going to get bigger, and have another faculty member, then it needed to combine Spain and Latin America.

Taylor: What would be a better name?

Allen: We called it Memory of Fire. After we called it Hispanic Forms, and that didn't fly, we thought we needed to get something more vague. Also, it was more radical, because it was the title of a book by Eduardo Galeano, who was a very radical Latin American studies writer.

Taylor: That makes sense.

Allen: Anyway, I was in Spain with students when Alice and Evelia were hired. But there was only one Spanish position announced, and both Alice and Evelia were there. And Russ Lidman—who knew Spanish, and had a lot of interest in Latin America—was Provost, and he somehow found money to hire both of them, instead of just one. So, all of a sudden, I have a surplus of Spanish-teaching help. I remember, I was in Granada, and Jose called me in Granada to tell me about Alice and Evelia being hired. So that's how there turned out to be enough Spanish teachers.

At some point, before all this, French and Spanish and Japanese—meaning, Susan Fiksdal, Setsuko Tsutsumi and I—got together and regularized what we thought should be the procedures for a Japanese program, a Spanish program, and a French program. Susan Fiksdal was really the one who did it first. She went to France, and she found families for students to stay with. And she set up a program that would be—the idea of it was that instead of just having a four-quarter-hour Spanish class attached to it, it would have eight quarter-hours of Spanish. So, there would be twice as many Spanish classes involved in the curriculum, and then the rest of the curriculum would be in English. The books that we read would all be in English, and they would be about history and culture, and students would take half-time Spanish language. Then, spring quarter, students would go to the country of choice.

And especially if you started as an intermediate—the Spanish classes were only offered at the beginning level and intermediate level—that was kind of a source of a lot of problems, because nobody's language background was ever the same. [chuckles] But if you were an intermediate student who started that program, and went through that year, and took it seriously, and then spent spring quarter abroad, you had a whole lot of what qualified as a major in another college.

Anyway, we did that. And we decided we would have that kind of program, and they would rotate regularly. At first, they would happen every three years. Not the same three years. There would be a French program, and then the next year, a Spanish program, and the next year a Japanese program, and then start over. That's what was going on at the beginning. And then, the Spanish program got popular enough that it could go every other year for a while. Since I have not been there anymore, I really don't know what's happened, but I know people don't spend spring quarter in Spain anymore.

Taylor: But they often spend spring quarter in some Spanish-speaking place.

Allen: Yeah, they do. I think they do.

Taylor: When you think back about your legacy at the college, is that where you think it is, with the Spanish program?

Allen: Oh, no, I don't. [laughing]

Taylor: What would you say is your legacy, and maybe what are you proudest of?

Allen: I'm proud of a lot of the hiring that I did, because I . . . there were some needs that I seemed to perceive before other people perceived them. The biggest example I can think of right now was comparative religion.

The reason that I perceived that need is that in my Spanish program, students would get this heavy, heavy dose of Catholicism, medieval Catholicism, and they'd have all kinds of problems with it, [laughing] and the Spanish Inquisition, particularly. What's that about? [laughter] So we would read all this intercultural stuff, trying to figure out what happened between the Muslims and the Jews and the Christians before the Spanish Inquisition.

So, that just brought up the subject of religion, and comparative religion in particular, all the time. I remember one time in my seminar, things were so acrimonious. I think it was kind of a fundamentalist Christian older woman. She just got up and stamped out. She just left. And she wouldn't come back. She left the program, she left the school, she left it. [laughing]

So I thought, well, somebody needs to help us talk about these religion things. I made that argument one time when I was on the hiring DTF, I guess, and we did advertise a comparative religion position. I chaired the committee that brought that guy to campus. His name was Lance Laird.

Taylor: That was a big loss when he left.

Allen: Yes, it was a huge loss.

Taylor: Did you ever get to teach with him?

Allen: I did teach with him. I taught a program [laughing]—the college evolved from titles involving two things to titles involving three things. [laughter] So I taught with Lance Laird in a program called Crescent, Cross and Cupola. It was about Islam and Roman Catholicism and the Greek Orthodox Church. And Pat Krafcik, who belongs to the Greek Orthodox Church, was the person who taught that. Crescent, Cross and Cupola was the program where I taught with Lance, and I learned everything I know about Islam from him. And I thought that was very, very good. I was very proud of that.

Who else did I hire? Oh, I can't remember very much about this, but I actually hired Stephanie Coontz. And that was coming out of, in the very first years, being the only woman who worked with the Women's Center. The young women in the Women's Center wanted some more faculty doing women's studies, and so we somehow promoted a position to teach women's studies, and Stephanie was hired. And I remember calling her up—I think it was after she had been offered the job—and asking her if she was going to accept. So, I actually did that. That turned out to be very significant for the college.

Taylor: That was about the third year?

Allen: Yeah.

Taylor: At the most. Maybe it was the second. Third year, probably.

Allen: I think third.

Taylor: The other person I connect you with is Leonard Schwartz.

Allen: Oh, definitely!

Taylor: That's later, but you had to go to bat for him.

Allen: Oh, yeah. That is a story, I think. Because I was singlehandedly responsible for getting Leonard. Singlehandedly. Because this is what happened.

We had a subcommittee that was reading the files. The files were for a creative writing position, specializing in poetry. I don't think I was involved in anybody deciding that that was a priority or anything, but I was on that subcommittee. We had a huge—you can imagine, a creative writing position for a poet. There was a huge pile of applications, over 100. We had divided them up, and I was supposed to read one-half of the alphabet—I guess I was supposed to read the top half of the alphabet—and other people on the subcommittee were supposed to read the bottom of the alphabet.

It developed that I was so busy that I didn't have enough time during the week to read these files, so I would go into the deans' area on the weekend and read files. One Saturday or Sunday, I went into the deans' area, and I took the wrong stack of files. I took the second half of the alphabet. I was reading through, and I didn't even notice. [laughter] I was really wiped out, for some reason, so I didn't

even realize I was reading the wrong stack. And I came up on Leonard, and I said, “Well, this guy is really impressive. We need to put him on here.”

So, I singled him out. And the people who were assigned to read that stack did not single him out. So when we had a meeting of the whole group, I had to confess that I had read out of line. I was sorry that I had read out of line, but I had found this great guy. So then I had to convince the other people who were supposed to be reading that part that he really should be invited.

I don't know, I think I had a special fondness for Jewish people from New York, because I had been so blown away by Jewish people from New York when I lived in New York. I thought they were so wonderful. [whispering] I thought, god, there's no way that a school like Evergreen could ever get a Jewish person from New York. People like that just wouldn't want to come here. But here was a person, a specific individual, who had a real-life reason for coming here; namely, that his wife was Chinese, and they wanted to be closer to China was a big part of it. Plus, they wanted to get out of New York City, because they had a daughter, and they knew they couldn't afford to send their daughter to school in New York City. That worked out really well.

Taylor: I think he's not only been successful, I think he's been happy.

Allen: Yeah, he has.

Taylor: A real contribution. Where do we go from here?

Allen: I don't know. What time is it?

Taylor: Let's take a little break.

Allen: Okay. A while back, we were talking about what I thought my heritage at the college was, or what I had given the college. I think it was mostly a certain kind of teaching, but it's hard to say whether it's still there or not because it's a very personal thing. I developed a way—because at the very beginning, the very first year, I felt really, really close to my students, probably much more close to my students than I felt to any of the faculty. I was really noticing them, and figuring out how to help them as individuals, and really crashing when I couldn't. Like with Regon Unsoeld, for example. [laughing] That thread remained in my teaching through my whole career, I think, that student-centeredness. Even though I learned a bunch more material—I learned from everybody I ever taught with; I learned how they thought; I learned what kind of things they read, and I read the same kind of things that they read. I learned all about Marxism, and a lot about Freud, right at the beginning of Evergreen from people I taught with.

Anyway, I did develop my command of material, and I developed my ability to lecture. But I always stayed a very student-focused teacher. It changed a lot over the years, because I grew up. At the beginning, I was very close—well, not that close in age to my students. I was 30 when the college started, and so my students were maybe approximately 10 years younger than I. But then, I had older students, too. There were always a few students in their twenties, and later, there were reentry women, who sometimes were older than I was, so the age relationship between me and my students changed, of course. That just would happen normally.

But I got very, very good at being a non-directive teacher, I think. At first, everybody wanted me to be more directive. Everybody wanted me to tell them what to do. I just kind of really believed, like in seminar, that I shouldn't be providing the subject matter for seminar. I shouldn't be raising all the questions. I should maybe let the students start a question, and then try to focus the question a little to help them out, or something like that. But they should be running where the seminar was going, because they were the ones who knew what their own learning was like, and were inside their own learning, and could figure out what to do about it. And I really couldn't, I thought.

That's the kind of teacher I came to be. It got a lot more effective as the years went on, [laughing] probably because I wasn't so . . . I was still involved, and I still was very, very attentive, but I wasn't personally wounded or something if some student didn't get it. I just knew finally that not everybody was going to get it, but the people who got it would get something good.

I was amazed when I looked at my self-evaluations. I wrote something like a six-page, single-spaced self-evaluation that was all about teaching all-women classes, composed of people who were like my mother and people who were like my daughters. And talking about how I had to switch back and forth when I was with such a group. I had to switch back and forth between my mother's suit and my father's suit from time to time. But all of the whole thing that I wrote is based on two incidents that didn't even happen in class. They weren't about learning material, they were about stuff that happened in the hallways.

I was just amazed at how closely I watched my students, and how I thought about them, and analyzed them, and critiqued them. I really wondered how many other people did it like that.

Taylor: One of the things that would be useful, I think, is if you want to read what Ryan said. Does that make sense?

Allen: Okay. Yeah, I can read this.

Taylor: And the other thing is that when we first met, you said something about you wanted to—I asked you about your parents, and you said, “I want to bring them up when I talk about students and teaching. Because it happened much later.” You said that at your house a couple of weeks ago.

Allen: My parents? I don’t remember what I said.

Taylor: It was something about how your growing up, and your relationship with your parents, impacted the way you taught. You said you wanted to delay it until now. I don’t know what it was.

Allen: Oh, okay. Well, I can think of one possibility. Okay. So this is an evaluation that I got from a student in 2001. This student’s name was Ryan Grayson. He was my student in a core program, and he wrote this third person. He didn’t write me a letter, but he wrote about me. I think it’s just beautiful, and probably the nicest thing anybody ever said about me.

Nancy allows our seminar freedom. She is evanescent in this manner. There were times when I wished she would appear and tell us what to think, and how to grasp hold of our material. But it was when she didn’t that I found myself to reason on my own behalf toward a logical end. Nancy allows you the space to work through these moments, personally and publicly. When it was I failed to make sense of things—and it was often—she was ready with an austere compassion, selflessly attentive like shade.

I think that last part is incredible.

Taylor: Yeah, that’s good.

Allen: But, if I was going to say something about my parents, I said a lot at the very beginning of this interview. I said a lot about my father, because the first story I told was about when I was four, and I would watch my father reading at night. He would be sitting in a chair, holding this book in his hands, and just turning the pages. He wouldn’t know I was there. I would just watch him, and he would be completely silent, and he would be turning pages, and he would obviously be so satisfied. That’s what made me want to learn to read. Undoubtedly, I have always been an extremely bookish person. And being such a bookish person is what made me love school, and want to go to school more, and want to go to more and more school. I wanted to teach school. That’s my father’s influence.

But my mother’s influence, I guess, was much more complicated, because she was not my favorite parent, and she basically tried to hold me back from school in whatever way she could. When I was a junior at Occidental, I applied for a study-abroad program through Princeton to spend the summer between my junior and senior year in Europe, doing research. Occidental used to call itself the “Princeton of the West,” but it actually did have some connection with Princeton, which was apparent in this program I went on. I went with students from Princeton, and Columbia, and Harvard, I think, and I don’t know exactly where else.

Anyway, on the day I learned that I was accepted to go to this program, I called up my mom. I'm so excited. I'm just wildly excited. I'm going to tell her that I'm going to go to Europe this summer, and I got this scholarship to go to Europe, and I'm getting this free trip, and I'm so happy. So I start babbling on the phone, and I tell her this stuff.

When I got done talking, she said, "Oh. Oh, dear. Do you really think you should do that?" [laughing] I couldn't believe it! It was like she was worried about my taking too many risks, or my health, or something. And she was just so far from understanding what I was about, or what I had at stake, or what I wanted to do.

Taylor: That's sad.

Allen: So, I was always motivating myself. Really, nobody in my family was pushing me. My dad kind of trusted that I was going to do what I wanted to do, and I would be fine. But my mom was not helpful at all. However, the reason my mom was some of these ways is she was a very serious depressive, and I knew that from the time I was six. I was six when she had her first real horrible depression.

So, when she's an old woman, and she has recently put my father in a nursing home because he has Alzheimer's, she needed me to rescue her. She was kind of incapable of surviving in Southern California on her own, and so I had to bring her to Olympia, because I was literally all she had at that point. I brought her to Olympia, and got to know her again in her seventies, so this whole theme appeared in my thinking about my students, and my reading and writing about mothers and daughters. The mothers were the ones who needed to be rescued. I thought the mothers needed rescuing a lot more than the daughters did. So I have a whole lot of writing about mothers and daughters, and it mostly is about me trying to rescue my mom, and keep her from being depressed, and help her live longer, and all that sort of thing. So I think that's probably what I said I wanted to talk about later.

Taylor: Do you think that has anything to do with changes in women, and women's consciousness, and sexism, and changes in perception? I mean, the situation that mothers are in, and your understanding of them. Is that a result of women's roles?

Allen: What a mother is, is a result of women's roles, I guess. I'm not any authority on motherhood in a physical sense, because I never had any kids. Any mothering that I ever did was always of people not biologically related to myself. Actually, I like it much better that way. I really am not at all sad that I never had kids.

If you're a mother in the sense I'm talking about, you get to do a lot more of it, and you get to have a lot more different chances with different individuals. Because sometimes it takes, and

sometimes it doesn't take. Plus, you don't have to worry about your genetic heritage, which I really, as a member of my family, with the mental health problems in my family, I really would not have wanted to have those succeed me because of my actions. So that's what I know how to say about that, I guess.

Taylor: I think the women at the college who are mothers, or were mothers, have a very different story to tell about their experience at the college, and how they were treated, than we do.

Allen: You mean the faculty who are mothers?

Taylor: People like Carolyn Dobbs, or . . .

Allen: . . . Sandie Nisbet.

Taylor: Sandie. I don't know, it could be the younger ones.

Allen: What would they say, do you think?

Taylor: I think the expectation of the college to live the college, and spend your whole life, your whole waking hours worrying about the college . . .

Allen: Yeah.

Taylor: . . . and helping students, and being there for students, and being involved in the planning and all that. And mothers saying, "That's all fine and good, but I have two little kids at home, and you're designing a college that doesn't account for that."

Allen: Yeah. Well, that's true.

Taylor: And the men saying, "Women aren't doing their—they're going off, they won't do this and that because they have their families." Anyway, I think that was an issue.

Allen: Hm. That's interesting.

Taylor: I don't know. I only remember talking to Carolyn about it.

Allen: So that's one of the reasons that they didn't want to hire any wives of faculty members for so long?

Taylor: I don't know. That could have been. I don't know who made that decision.

Allen: Because I really was meant to be a teacher, and not a mother, I think. But I think a lot of people are not like me.

Taylor: Yeah. I feel the same way.

Allen: There has to be some ability for people to have families.

Taylor: This is a side note, but I remember, years and years ago, having a conversation about Richard Jones; that he was meant to be a teacher and not a father.

Allen: Oh, yeah.

Taylor: He was a much better teacher than he was a father.

Allen: Interesting.

Taylor: Another conversation that we might have next time is something about your intellectual interests, and what you thought about, and did, and how they changed, and how they developed. It fits with this part, about . . .

Allen: I can talk about the St. Teresa of Avila phase.

Taylor: Well, or just what you were interested in, and what the college supported, and what kept you intellectually alive? I know, for me, it was the joy of—faculty development was teaching these programs, where you read things that you couldn't imagine reading, and saw the connections with them, and taught with people that allowed you to have these good conversations.

Allen: Yeah.

Taylor: In a sense, even though you weren't doing research on Teresa of Avila, you were having this intellectual experience.

Allen: Oh, yeah.

Taylor: That, to me, is the greatest joy.

Allen: Yeah, that was the main thing. I had a sabbatical really early, and way before I did anything about Teresa of Avila, I thought I was going to be Christina Stead's biographer. I spent two months in Australia, going to visit this famous woman novelist every single day, and sitting with her, and talking to her. That was an enormous intellectual interest that was developed through a contact at the college, Stephanie Coontz knew her. Stephanie Coontz's mother, in particular, knew her, and got me access to her. And then, I was able to get a sabbatical.

That kind of support, just kind of getting out of your way and letting you do stuff, was always there at the college. You couldn't have it every year, obviously, but there were . . . yeah, we had a good leave program, I think.

Taylor: Good support for that.

Allen: Yeah.

Taylor: You had one sabbatical in Australia, and then you had a sabbatical in Granada?

Allen: Yeah, I did.

Taylor: Did you just have two?

Allen: I can't remember. I may have taken unpaid leave for a quarter once. But I cannot remember more than two. I'll think about it.

Taylor: Sort of connected to this, in terms of faculty development, think of experiences you had where the college either did something or didn't do something that helped you, or paid attention to you.

Allen: I have a perfect example, because I think it's something that doesn't ever happen anymore. There used to be—I mean, it's probably crazy now. I think people probably wouldn't do it anymore, but we used to have these retreats. The faculty would go away for a weekend. Or maybe it was Thursday and Friday, I'm not sure. It might have even been Saturday or Sunday.

We would go to Camp Wooten, or someplace fairly close by, and sleep in sheds, or whatever we slept in, or tents or something, and eat in the dining hall, and do nothing but talk about curriculum planning. Do things like . . . oh, I remember there was this kind of way of starting a workshop, where you'd have two circles, one inside of the other, of faculty. One circle would be walking in one direction, and the other circle would be walking in the other direction. There would be some music playing. We'd walk around in these circles for a little while, and somebody would stop the music. Then, you had to go and plan a program with whoever you happened to be next to.

Basically, we had to do curriculum planning exercises with random other people. And I think that was very helpful. Probably the most helpful thing about it was a push in that direction, just a push, saying, "The college supports this. The college wants you to know how to do this." And then, letting you do it. I really got a lot out of certain things like that that we did.

And then, I remember a phase where nobody wanted to go on them anymore. You couldn't put your family through that. I don't know. But I was always up for it. I always wanted to do it.

Taylor: Barbara Smith was the real key to that, I think. She loved retreats.

Allen: Huh.

Taylor: I liked them, too.

Allen: Yeah. Except for that very first one that lasted two weeks.

Taylor: That one was with students.

Allen: Yeah, I know.

Taylor: And now, people won't do them.

Allen: Yeah. Even on campus. I mean, in my latter years, they came to all happen on campus.

Taylor: I think one of the serious problems now is that people don't know the new faculty, they only know their little circle.

Allen: They don't know each other, yeah.

Taylor: So how in the world can they plan a program when they don't know anybody to plan it with?

Allen: Exactly.

Taylor: So you see these plaintive messages going around, saying, "Help! I need somebody to teach with!" And there's no opportunity to make it happen.

Allen: Well, that's how to make it happen.

Taylor: Yeah. So I think we should quit for today, because we're going to do another day.

Allen: Yeah.