

GROWING YOUNG – LIBRETTO – Shorter Version
MARIANNA MOTT NEWIRTH – PETER MICHAEL VON DER NAHMER

GROWING YOUNG

Libretto by Marianna Mott Newirth and
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Based on interviews done in the month of June 2017
with Seniors from Orchard Hill, New Ulm
led by Peter Michael von der Nahmer

Interviews transcribed by Bunny Hanson

Gratitude:

Peter Michael von der Nahmer would like to thank all participating seniors who spend their time, kindness, laughter and stories about their lives. There is no greater gift than learning from them and what they have been through because they have been us and we will be them.

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LIBRETTO

Prologue Part 1 (speaking directly to the audience)

MIKE: Early this summer I met with several seniors at Orchid Hills to talk about their lives, about the time when they were teenagers; in the nineteen forties, the nineteen thirties, even.

I wanted them to „grow young“ again in their minds so we could go back together into the past to learn more about those times and how people lived their lives. I wanted to know what was important for them. I wanted to know what made them happy, what scared them. I was specifically interested in our shared German-American heritage and what that meant back then and what it may mean to us...to me...today. I know I have something to learn from them.

Part 2: Conversations with Mike (addressing the seniors as a group)

Do you know what is connecting us? – having a German American background...I love it because I feel like I can talk to my grandparents in some [strange] way. I am trying to understand your generation and where you came from. I am trying to connect with my grandmother through you, like an anthropologist. I am a detective looking for what it must have been like back then.

I was never able to have a conversation with my grandparents in this way. My grandfather died in a Russian prison camp, my grandmother never got over it and was a very strict grandmother. I was scared of her. We never got the chance to talk...but now I do...maybe through you.

Does this speak to you? That there is an appointed time for everything and a time for every affair under the heavens. Does that mean anything? Together we can find what is the story you would be interested in telling, so...

What is there in your heart and what is there that you think “Oh my God, this really has to be told. What do you think is the most important story of your life; just for me to understand. ...if you are open to this, only if you are open to this. If you don’t want to talk about this just say, “No Mike, I don’t want to talk about it.” But it would be just interesting how your generation dealt with these questions because I could never ask my grandmother because she died when I got interested in talking to her. It would be interesting to know how your generation dealt with these questions.

Mike (continued): Would you like to do an experiment with me? Would you like to close your eyes and we will bring you back to your teenage years and we are going to see what happens, yes?

Senior: Oh my.

Mike: Would you help us with this?

Senior: Sure, sure I'll try.

Mike: Okay terrific. Now close your eyes, relax, feel the chair, your body...almost going into the ground and connecting with the world around you. You are getting very interested with everything you can hear outside, the birds that can sing, you can feel the clothes on your body, you can feel the glasses on your nose. Now lets go back to your teenage years and remember when you were about twelve years old.

What is it you would like to tell people about yourself, people who do not know a lot about you, what would you like to tell them about you? What is the most important thing you would like to tell them so that they know what your life is about?

I have the question...why I am here, yeah, that is a question I constantly ask myself. My life centers around asking questions. I feel the center of my life, besides being a composer, seems to be two things. The first thing is that I have to finish the stories of my parents which I really do, yeah, I studied things that they could never study and I live parts of their lives, I finish their life stories literally. The other part of my life seems to be simply to ask questions for the purpose of making people think.

I was always interested in the mind and why we do the things we do and what is our life stories. What have our forefathers done that is embedded into us and what parts have they given us? I have always been struggling with having this very strong American background and this German background and I always felt in-between chairs.

Today I add some new chairs, ok?

DORIS G.

DG: You are a composer?

M: I am a composer of opera and musical theatre pieces

DG: Uhuh...I am not into music

M: So what are you into?

DG: Not music, but I mean cooking

M: Cooking

DG: Cooking. You come along with cooking and I'll help you there! Cooking and sewing was my thing more so, but I mean, music was not.

M: What do you think the difference is in cooking in the old times and cooking today?

DG: Well, the way I am yet, I mean who should I say? Cooking in [my] time you used what you had and made what you could make out of it. Because we were in the depression years we had nothing. There was the garden...I grew up on a farm. I don't need a grocery store when I want to make something. I don't need this quarter teaspoon of tarragon or a half a teaspoon of [that], you know, like that. I am just a plain, old-fashioned cook...I make basic stuff.

M: What is your favorite dish that you like to do?

DG: Well, sauerkraut and dumplings and pork and landjaegers. There are a thousand different ways of making dumplings. I've got leftover bread buns, hamburger buns and hotdog buns make the best dumplings. You shred them and you add that to that potato mix. And then you go with your egg and your moisture and then you put baking powder in there and you make your dumplings and that is the way it is. Then there is different [kinds of] dumplings. You know from fresh bread from bread dough, you know, it is like making biscuits or buns and then you cook them, but then you can't ever cut with a knife, you gotta have a string on the plate when you get them out and you have to cut them with a thread and then you got your two pieces. They are so fluffy, they would just squash down [if you used a knife]

I like to make German potato salad. There was a contest once, New Ulm was celebrating its 150th anniversary so they had old time music in the park and they had a potato salad contest. "Oh," I said "I think I will make a bowl of potato salad." I took it up there, there were about eight entries and some people were [good] cooks, you know, Oh God, I will never compete with them and here...Doris won a hundred fifty chamber dollars for the best potato salad. It was a hundred fifty dollars and I felt so proud of myself. It isn't that I won, but that I beat two other ladies that are prime cooks!

Then you got your sauerkraut. At home we made ten gallons of kraut; processed it in a big crock. You cut it up mix it with salt and you pack it in there until the juice came out and you

put a weight on top and you let it sit for six weeks, fermenting, and then you could put it in jars and that is the way we did it [at] home.

M: How did you survive the cold winters back in the time in Minnesota?

DG: Well my mother and me we did a lot of processing. [This was] before we had electricity. Like when they butchered meat; cut it up, made sausage, smoked it, you know, it was always cold. The meat was frozen and then mother put it in the grain bin in the granary, buried it. So it was frozen and then it kept frozen. Beef roasts hunks of meat, that was put on a tray...then you dug a hole in there and you buried it in there. The spring came and the outside was thawed so if we needed meat we just dug around in there, you got a package of meat out. You had fresh meat.

M: Did you sometimes forget where you buried it?

DG: No, we knew where it was buried. It was a bin, it was usually in a wheat bin that froze...so that was how you survived, that is the way it was. and you did a lot of canning and a big potato pile in the basement and carrots too. You put carrots in a big crock and filled the crock up with sand and then you kept pulling them out. Then we had chickens, we had a hundred chickens or so...don't lay eggs in winter because they need sunlight for their eyes; somehow that makes them...you know. But chickens has to have light for the eyes. Now that is a statement now.

Cows, yes we had cows! We sold the cream, we had to separate the milk. You had to milk them by hand. No electricity. And you came into the barn at night with a lantern, my parents did that. After I was married I was in a situation where there was electricity and it was on the uppity up, but you are talking about how I grew up eighty years ago. I am ninety one now.

M: Yeah, when I was growing up we had fresh milk. I was used to fresh milk...and I didn't like the other milk any more

DG: Okay, now we are talking; now you are on my side of the fence a little bit. Okay that is the way it was. It is rough if I think back how my parents and grandparents had to struggle to get to where they are compared to when I was married and how we made ends meet. It is two generations and now my kids again they would never think of how we grew up. We made a living on a two hundred acre farm. We made a good living. You could never do that now, no way on a farm.

To the Audience: My name is Doris. I was born in February 1926 in New Ulm here and I grew up on a farm close to New Ulm. I like to cook, I like to enter contests and I was always lucky with that. Me and my husband got along really good, ya know? Sure there were some ups and down sometimes but we made the ends meet and that was it. I got no complaints.

DOLORES K.

DK: What should I say about me?

M: Whatever you want. Where you come from, what you did, just a little bit. You can think about it a little bit.

DK: OK My name is Dolores, I am living in Orchard Hill right now and I have three daughters but they don't live in New Ulm...one lives in Arizona, one in Wyoming and one in Rogers. I like it [here] I will be staying here as long as I can. Everybody is real nice here and I can't think of anything else...

Underneath this dialogue Dolores' theme rises quietly, patiently, unhurriedly.

M: Is there a favorite moment you had as a teenager, a moment that you always think back?

DK: Well let's see, you don't have this on your whatchamacallit...there is one moment, my husband was in service anyway, when he came home that was exciting. That was in '44

M: forty-four, that was almost at the end of Second World War

DK: Yes, forty-four, yeah that is when he got out

We married

Went on honeymoon to Duluth

Stayed a whole week – a lake – a museum – a zoo...we just kind of made the rounds

[Then] we rented an apartment – didn't have any furniture – sat on the floor – a little old lady downstairs always read our mail, ha ha

M: She read your mail?

DK: we got all kinds of stuff [delivered] and she already told us what we got in the mail – she was nosey but we ignored it, ya know.

I told my dad, “ya know what, we found a house and you will like that because it is right next to a bar and you can go over there and play cards with the old-timers.” Anyway, we bought the house. And then we bought, you know, a General Store. Yeah I worked there but then I decided I would like to go back to New Ulm. So [my husband] decided we should sell it, so we did. He sold it and then we moved back to New Ulm. I [worked] at Sears and he got a job at Ford Garage, yeah, it was Ford Garage.

At this point Dolores' theme has built into a deeply joyful melody, overtaking the words, as if she is the one sitting at the piano making the music happen under her fingertips. Her feeling is one of amazement, awe, great longing and a reach beyond the words issuing from her mouth. The words are no longer important;

the music speaks who she is now. The words space out – detached – serving as garnish on the melody.

M: What is the most important thing for you about loving somebody else?

DK: Most important –my husband – very kind
never hit – never hollered
We had arguments but he would go out in the garage
When he would come back everything was ok again
We just got along

I think, he spoiled me
I wanted something
I got it
I got what
I wanted
Not real big
Just
ordinary
stuff

It is a great life

Crescendo and then resolution to a quiet place once again

M: Thank you very much

DK: We'll see you again then?

M: Yes, absolutely

JEANNIE G.

JEANNIE: I can look at some of these pictures and kind of go back in time
This is my mom and this is me.
It has been a couple of days ago

MIKE: Just a few, just a few not too far away

JEANNIE: I always thought I had such a good life. I mean, some people don't think so, but I was very happy just to be, just to be I guess. Music was a big part, dad sang all the time and so to me that was just me because then I took off on that, you know? When I was in 8th grade I asked my mom if I could take an old guitar that she had up in the closet and I said, "can I buy some strings for that?" and she said "oh sure you can" and so I did and then I started because Dad and Mom sang all the time. I have such good memories of that when I was younger...they would be singing up there in the front seat [of the car] Old songs...let me see, oh my gosh, Red River Valley, Silver Haired Daddy, that was the song.

Oh my gosh, my mind is getting a little weak in the knees.

I just used to spend hours singing and playing my guitar and to me that was really living. We had big, big trees at our place and I would just take the guitar out on the back porch and sit out there and sing and sing. The funniest thing, pretty soon a bird would come over and sit on a limb and pretty soon he would start singing too, a robin or a Meadowlark. I used to whistle at the Meadowlarks and if I could hear them, then I would I would whistle like he did and then he would keep on and get closer and he would flap wings, he would hop closer. It sounded like that maybe I should look into this.

MIKE: Can you sing any other songs that you really, really liked?

JEANNIE: Oh my gosh, if you would have asked me that a year ago I could have rattled off a whole bunch. We would sing every day. My Dad would sing in the field, when he was milking cows or whatever he was doing and he would always sing in the car. We would go to Mom's family. The women would always play cards and they were the feisty bunch and one of them would pull the other's hair.

I don't know how old they were, they were pretty big already, but even when they were married, they would come home to grandma's and they would play cards with grandma. The dining room table was one of those really nice tables, varnished and it was all worn off from playing solitaire there. You wear it off when you play solitaire and you deal out the cards and the end of the table was all wore off.

That is the trouble with my brain today. It seems like when I want to think of something really from back, not even all from back anymore, it is getting more so it is getting a little tweaky. I don't know if that is the right word for it, I suppose it is getting, no it is not wore out. I don't think they ever wear out until they quit.

MIKE: Sometimes with all the changes, when you remember it, you realize that you changed things as you remember them.

JEANNIE: That is true, you tweak it a little bit. You don't do that on purpose but maybe they are the things that you remember the most. I just know that singing was just a part of my life and I still like to do it as long as I remember words and stuff and my guitar sits in my room and I can [take] it any time I want to.

MIKE: This may be a weird question but sometimes do you feel you can talk to your guitar?

JEANNIE: Oh yes, especially if it didn't work, that would really bug me. [I would say] gosh darn, I have to sing today. This is no time to be going down [with a] busted string, but a busted string well a busted string – I always had a set of those along, in case, you know, you could change that...that is a little embarrassing. You were sitting in front of people and you should be singing but here you are winding your guitar string, but this [is] life, too, I guess. But I enjoy [my guitar] because it gets like a person like you want to talk to it. It was a good part of my life, I totally enjoyed it.

I always liked family and it was so important for living. Jan, my younger sister, married before I did which didn't bother me in the least. I was happy as heck. I had my guitar and my music.

It was a long time before between what did happen and could happen.

Mom always said I was pretty good, you know, I didn't get into too much trouble or so. We would go to dances, that was another thing, we would go to Sleepy Eye and New Ulm. It was just a regular building, nice place, nice smooth floors so you could just glide along. Mom said I had to go to the dance. I was crying because I didn't want to go...but my sister, she was raring to go.

Oh my gosh I was so bashful. So bashful but I got over it pretty quick. It didn't take too long. Sometimes somebody would ask [me] to dance...because otherwise us girls would always dance together, and then pretty soon...I gotta confess this. I saw this guy coming and I thought "oh boy I would really like to dance with him." He asked my sister. Ha ha! So it was thumbs down for him! I thought he was pretty good looking. Yeah I kind of had eyes for him I guess. We became friends, nothing more than friends. It was always kind of a joke between us because then I told him about it. [My sister] was so good though. I don't know what I would give to hear her laugh these days because she had this laugh. If you were any place in the room or for blocks around, you could hear her laugh. I was always so embarrassed at first but after you got over the embarrassment it was wonderful. We would still get into it once in a while, I would pull her hair...but she was raring to go like the filly ready to live life. She always did live life. It was a good life. I just wonder what God wants me to do left...I really have no regrets, maybe something's were a little tweaky that I did that I didn't have to do but life was good. I still must not be done because He hasn't called me yet. I'll see what I have to do yet.

I know why I like to sing songs to my kids. It is just kind of soothing. It is for both sides, for the one who sings and for the one who is listening. I always thought it makes things better living. Even though you are going through some tough times and some not so good times or whatever and if you can sing about, it relives the mind – you get better thoughts. I guess that is what you do.

→CUE: JEANNIE SINGS SONG

VERN S. - ...Because it's better than sitting around.

Note: To get more movement into the piece. Vern's character is separated in 3 different characters.

We see a group of men having a Männerstammtisch. They are enjoying themselves, blubbing about life. While the text holds funny moments within it, it is very important to take the characters serious and not make fun about them, since this is/was the life of a living person. Rather it will create humor that the audience should connect with those characters and within the play create situational humor. So the rule is, laugh with the characters, NOT making fun of them!!!

MAN 2:

My grandpa came from Germany and, well, he died in, oh well, he was 97.
He had a small suitcase or trunk and he came over from Germany
He lived in Searles. You know where Searles is?
And my grandmother was 102.
My dad was 104
Louie was 100. They were all in the 90's.

MAN 1:

I was born in 1937 on a farm in New Ulm with Scarlet fever.
Then when my brother married, I helped them farm.
And then in 1975 I moved to town.
Then I mowed the lawn at the chancery and after that I cleaned at the New Ulm Clinic.
Then I worked up at the Courthouse
I am 80 now and I retired when I was 70.

ALL MEN:

SONG ANOTHER BEER

ICH HÄTTE GERNE NOCH EIN BIER. MH.
EIN KALTES BIER DAS BRAUCHEN WIR. AH
GET ME ANOTHER AND I'LL DRINK THANKS TO YOU
THERE'S NOTHING BETTER THAN A GERMAN CRAFT BREW
UNLESS YOU'RE HAVING ONE OR MAYBE TWO.

I'D LIKE TO HAVE ANOTHER BEER. AH.
NOW ALL MY FRIENDS ARE FINALLY HERE. YES.
IT'S BEEN TO LONG SINCE WE HAVE SUNG THIS OLD SONG
I SHOULD GO FIX THE ROOF
BUT IF I TELL THE TRUTH
ICH HÄTTE GERNE, HÄTTE GERNE, HÄTTE GERNE
I'D RATHER HAVE ANOTHER BEER.

MAN 3:

I had 21 cows and my nephew, Mike, he milks over 100 now.
Well, a small farmer cannot make it now.
There is a program on the radio Sunday morning at six o'clock all about farming.
A big tractor costs \$16,500 and my dad he bought a John Deere A in 45 for \$1,000.
Five years later, he bought a 530, \$1,000 more with the coloring and the John Deere had the coloring.

MAN 2:

I always watch television, this show.
“How much beer did you drink?”
And they got beer, big beer mugs over there.
And the waitress can lift 14...
And they cling together that the beer flows out...

ALL MEN:

SONG ANOTHER BEER

MAN 1:

And I heard on television that after the celebration,
they find false teeth and stuff like that, that people lost, you know.
And the way they make hay over there.
They got hills.
And they put the canvass on there and put hay on there and fold it up.

MEN 2:

I ordered some shoes from Runnings,
well, about three years ago they were \$95.00, but now it is over \$100.
My dad had rotten teeth and that got him sick, but now it is going up again.
I heard over by Germany the young people smoke cigarettes

ALL MEN:

SONG ANOTHER BEER

MAN 1:

I had one brother. He died 10-12 years ago.
My dad died about 9-10 years ago,
My ma died in 1946. She was 35 years old.
All my uncles died, I am the only one..., well, besides nieces and nephews.

MAN 3:

Did you ever get married?

MAN 2:

No, well I had a hard time in my younger years and now I am 80, why should I get married.
They say at 50, 20% of the marriages get divorced.
I'm not fussy, but I don't want to get married.

Divorce that costs...
A single life is nice, too.

ALL MEN:
SONG ANOTHER BEER

MAN 2:
What is the greatest thing that happened in your life?

MAN 1:
Farming...
I wish I could go farming again.
Doing fieldwork, milking cows and separate the milk...
They always looked for a job for me, but farming was the best job for me.
(pause)
...because it's better than sitting around.

ALL MEN:
SONG ANOTHER BEER

(this is a moment of realizing what is missing from his life. This has to be taken serious. The audience needs to feel how important farming was for him but that in the end he also shifts it with the humorous sentence "because it's better than sitting around". I felt that this is line is basically summing up his life.)

Denouement (to come after Vern - Mike is, again, addressing all his seniors)

MIKE: I just wanted to tell you I am so grateful for the things you tell me, it is really great, it is super fascinating, I am so blessed that you share this with me. I just want you to know this. This is totally very, very strong. These are the things I was looking for. The stories that I can help you to encounter and that you bring them back and that other people can experience the feelings that you had. This is very, very strong.

So that is why I am interested in these kinds of stories because I learn through you as well. All of you have become like my grandparents now. It is the conversation that I always missed with my grandmother and my grandfather. I have the feeling that I have this conversation with all of you.

MIKE: Can I make a photo of you?

SENIOR: Boy, are you going to put me in prison somewhere?

MIKE: No, but can I make a photo of you? Is it okay?

SENIOR: Well okay. Don't put me in jail or something

MIKE: I won't put you in jail.

SENIOR: Well I don't care, yeah, [go ahead]

MIKE: Then I will make a photo of you so I can remember you when I am gone.

It is always terrific to talk to you. Thank you so much for your time.

Epilogue (speaking directly to the audience once again)

MIKE: During my interviews with these lovely people that shared such amazing insights into their lives I realized even more that it felt like I could or would have a conversation with my Grandmother who had passed away when I was just teenager. We never got a chance to really talk about the things she went through and how tough life was for her.

The magical thing that happened here with the seniors was that all of them became my grandparents. I asked the questions that really mattered to me as always I wonder about the people and the world; where we come from. Perhaps I can get a glimpse of where we might go to in the future.

I am immensely grateful for the stories my new grandfathers and grandmothers have shared with me. They helped me grow as I learned about how the world was when my grandparents grew up. These stories connect different generations. They also connect me with my forefathers through the voice of many different people. I am feeling very blessed today.