Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University initiating an oral history interview with Pauline Laurent. Today’s date is the 28th of June 2004. I am in the interview room in the Special Collections Building on the campus of Texas Tech in Lubbock and I’m speaking with Pauline by telephone from Santa Rosa, California. Good afternoon Pauline.

Pauline Laurent: Hello.

LC: How are you?

PL: Good.

LC: Very good. I wonder if we could start just by getting some basic biographical information about you. Where were you born and when?

PL: I was born in Prairie Du Rocher, Illinois. It’s a small town in southern Illinois. I was born on October 2, 1945.

LC: And tell me a little bit about your family. What about your father? What was his name?

PL: My father was Elmer Laurent and he worked in a grocery industry. He previously worked for other people that owned small retail grocery stores, and then he bought his own retail grocery store.

LC: And how did he do in that business?
PL: Well, he did well. He was a very friendly man and everyone liked him. Ultimately, he didn’t do well because he was afflicted with alcoholism and didn’t find a way out of that, so that pretty much ended his career and ultimately ended his life.

LC: Do you have any sense of where that came from? Was it disappointment or upset? I mean, you’ve given some thought to these issues I’m sure.

PL: Well yeah, I’m pretty sure that it’s a family thing. It’s a genetic thing. My father’s father died when my father was very young. He was probably eleven or twelve I believe when his father died of alcoholism. His father died of sclerosis of the liver and left my father’s mother, a very young widow with several children to raise on her own. So, I think it’s genetically inherited, the capacity to be an alcoholic.

LC: Okay. Had your father had any military service?

PL: No, my mother used to tell this story that my father was called up, inducted and he went to the place where he got a physical exam, and he failed his physical. She never told me why he failed his physical, I suspect it had something to do with the fact that he also was afflicted with diabetes and that too was genetically in his family. His sister had diabetes and several of his brothers.

LC: Wow

PL: So that may have been what kept him out of the service, but I’ve heard the story that he went away for the weekend and he went to do his physical and that my oldest brother told me he was so happy when dad came back and he flunked his physical.

LC: And this was during World War II then?

PL: Correct.

LC: You have, how many brothers and sisters?

PL: There were five of us; I was the youngest one.

LC: You’re the youngest?

PL: Yes.

LC: Okay. How old is your…and I mean here in terms of separated in time from you is the oldest in the family?

PL: My oldest brother, he died three years…uh, no wait a minute, he died five years ago and he was sixty-two when he died, the same age at which my father died. He died of colon cancer. He was diagnosed and two months later he died. And then I have
my second brother, you know, I’m not sure, I think he’s six years older than me. I’m
going to be fifty-nine pretty soon, so he must be somewhere in his mid-sixties. And then
my next brother is four years older than me, so I’m going to be fifty-nine, so he would be,
what, sixty-two. And then my sister is thirteen months older than I am.

LC: So lots of older brothers.

PL: Yeah, three older brothers, and then my sister, and then me. I was the last
child.

LC: And did you and your sister get along very well?

PL: You know, we did. It was complicated because my sister was deaf. She was
born deaf and so the handicapped…her handicapped made me feel somewhat responsible
for her and I think as a young child, I was pretty much in charge of taking care of her
because my mother was so overwhelmed with everything else.

LC: What was your mother’s name?

PL: Pearl, P-e-a-r-l.

LC: And her maiden name?

PL: Wiegard, W-i-e-g-a-r-d.

LC: Where was she from? Was she from Illinois?

PL: She grew up in southern Illinois, yes.

LC: In an agricultural family or…?

PL: Yes, her parents were sharecroppers, I believe they’re called, where they
farm the land and then they get one third of the income from the crops and then the
people that own the land get, you know, the rest of the income.

LC: Sure.

PL: So that’s what they did.

LC: And did she have a number of brothers and sisters also?

PL: She did. She came from a very large family. I don’t even know how many,
maybe ten children.

LC: No kidding.

PL: Yeah, there were two sets of twins, and she had several older brothers and at
one point, one of her brothers died. She used to tell me the story about how nobody
explained to her what had happened, but one of her young brothers died, he was under
ten, and she never knew why he died. He just died one day. I guess he had the flu or
something like that. But yeah, she came from a very large family and she was not the
youngest child. She was like the third from the youngest.

LC: How did your parents meet? Do you know anything of that story?
PL: You know, I don’t know how they met. When they met, it was a pretty
intense relationship, they were really attracted to each other and I have a lot of pictures of
them when they were dating and my mother did tell me that she married my father
because he was one of the few men in the town that had a car. He had a Model-A car and
she thought that was terrific. And also, my father came from a family that had some
money and my mother came from a very poor family and I think she thought that when
she married my dad, that was her salvation.

LC: Some stability and…
PL: Yeah, some financial stability.
LC: Yeah.
PL: And she used to tell me that she knew that my father had a drinking problem
before they got married, but he always told her, ‘When I marry you, I will quit drinking.’
LC: Did that happen at all? Did he stop at all, do you know?
PL: There were periods of time when I remember that my father wouldn’t be
drinking, maybe like a week or so, and during that time, it was very different in our
family, but he was never able to sustain the abstinence from alcohol. He would always
fall back into it and you know, as an adult myself having struggled with my own
addictions, I know the nature of the addictive process, and I know that unless you have a
support system, you can’t really stop these addictions on your own.

LC: And did it affect your family? You said that it was clearly different when he
was abstaining, but were there sort of systemic effects that you were aware of?
PL: Oh my goodness, yes, definitely it effected our family. It was like there was
always an elephant in the room and nobody named it.
LC: Yeah.
PL: And even to this day, when I speak…both of my parents are dead now, and
when I speak to my brother, I have a pretty good relationship with one of my brothers and
when I speak to my brother about alcoholism, I can feel that he’s uncomfortable with me
naming it, you know, because it’s really never been named. The thing that really

disrupted our whole family life was never named.

    LC: Right, it’s interesting how people get comfortable with sort of the hiding
rather than the exposing.

    PL: Yeah, and there was so much energy that went into going to church on
Sunday and looking good, you know. We all would go to church on Sunday like this
perfect little family and then, you know, Monday through Saturday, all hell would break
lose at home behind closed doors, but the public didn’t get to see that. And recently I
spoke with a girlfriend who I went to elementary school with and high school with and
she said, ‘Your childhood looked idealistic, you know, it looked perfect compared to
mine.’ And I said, ‘Oh, but you don’t know what went on behind closed doors.’ So,
there was a lot of very, very painful difficult situations that went on in family and I often
say that I grew up in a war zone. It was literally a war zone that I grew up in.

    LC: Let me ask you a little bit about your sister and how she coped…

    PL: Okay.

    LC: Um, growing up in, I would imagine, the late ‘40s and during the ‘50s as a
deaf child, I mean, what happened to her? Did she go to regular school?

    PL: No she didn’t, and I have to tell you, there was also a brother that was deaf.

    LC: Oh okay.

    PL: The oldest son was fine; he had somewhat of a hearing loss. The second son
was deaf, the third child was okay, and then my sister was deaf and I was okay. So,
every other child had a problem with hearing and my mother said that they had never
heard of anyone previously in the family history that had had a problem with deafness.
And my mother never realized that her first child was deaf until one day, my father’s
mother said to my mother, ‘I think you should take Larry to the doctor. I don’t think he
can hear. I was calling him and calling him and calling him and he never turned around
and he didn’t respond. I don’t think he can hear.’ And by this time, my brother was
maybe, I don’t know how old he was, maybe as old as four years old, and my mother
never realized that he was deaf, which shows a lot about my mother that she didn’t pay
attention. So, finally my mother did take him to the doctor because he was always acting
out and causing a lot of trouble all the time, I suspect because he had this deaf thing that
wasn’t acknowledged. Another elephant in the room that wasn’t acknowledged, so
finally my mother took him to the doctor, and indeed, he was deaf. So then she started to
have each of her children checked after that and so the second son was deaf, and then the
first daughter was deaf and then I was okay.

LC: Were your two siblings profoundly deaf?
PL: My sister’s profoundly deaf, my brother has more hearing than my sister, so
when my brother speaks, you can understand him. But when my sister speaks, it’s very
garbled and it’s very hard to understand her. I can understand her because I grew up with
her.

LC: Sure.
PL: But basically what happened was these two children went to a boarding
school, a Catholic boarding school where they actually stayed at the school and they were
taught how to lip read and how to speak by these Catholic nuns that taught them. It was
St. Joseph’s Institute [for the deaf] in St. Louis, Missouri, and they would come home
every other weekend just for Friday night and Saturday night, then the whole family
would jump in the car and we would drive them all the way back to St. Louis for another
two weeks.

LC: That sounds incredibly disruptive.
PL: Yeah.
LC: Wow.
PL: So, you know, my sister in elementary school, she was gone most of the
time. She’d come home for a couple of days and then she’d be gone, but in high school,
she went to a hearing high school and she and I went to the same high school and it was
very difficult for her because in those days, they did not have an interpreter that would
follow her around.

LC: Absolutely, yeah.
PL: So she sat in classrooms and didn’t hear a word and tried to just get it all out
of the book and plus, she was very isolated. No one befriended her and you know, I
really regret that I didn’t really befriend her either. She became kind of like a, I don’t
know, an albatross around my neck. And, you know, I feel bad about that, but she was
someone that I was ashamed of. She was odd, she stood out, she was disabled, and I
didn’t want to be affiliated with her, you know. I didn’t want that, that was you know…
LC: Well, you were an adolescent as well.
PL: Yeah, but you know, we’ve since cleaned it up and we have a very close
relationship now and she comes to see me. She’s coming to visit me this year.
LC: Where is she living then?
PL: She’s living in northern Illinois, Chicago area.
LC: Okay. In the schools, you said she pretty much had to…when she was going
to the mainstream high school, had to get it out of the book. How did she do
academically?
PL: You know, I don’t remember what kind of grades she got, but she graduated.
You know, in some of the subjects that I shared with her, I helped her. Like we were in
the same bookkeeping class. She was a year behind me I think, so we weren’t really
taking the same classes together, but she did really well. She graduated and everything. I
don’t think she had really good grades, but she ended up going to college and she went to
Gallaudet College, which is a special college in D.C. for deaf people.
LC: It’s the best college in the United States.
PL: Yes it is.
LC: Yeah.
PL: Yes, and it was there that she met her husband.
LC: How did she come to go there? Do you remember?
PL: You know, I don’t know. I have no idea how she got it together to go there.
She must’ve met some people that turned her onto Gallaudet College because she made it
happen. I mean, it wasn’t because my parents initiated anything, because my parents
were not parents that encouraged any of us to go to college.
LC: That’s what I was wondering.
PL: Not at all. It was like, you know, my mother used to tell me in high school,
you take three years of Home Ec. so that you know how to be a good wife. So she made
me take three years of Home Ec., Home Economics, so I could learn to cook and sew and
be a good wife. So she prepared me for being a good wife and it was on my own that I
initiated taking business subjects and other subjects that I was interested in and at the
time, there weren’t a lot of electives. But yeah, my sister got it together to go to college.

Where she made a tragic mistake was her freshmen year in college, she got pregnant and
quit and got married and never went back.

LC: Well, that of course is something that happens to abled and disabled students
in college.

PL: Right.

LC: Who, you know, kind of a lose sight of why they’re there sometimes, but it’s
extremely interesting that she was, you know, able to arrange somehow without family
support really, to get herself admitted and get to Washington, D.C. and all that.

PL: Yeah, she’s a pretty strong woman.

LC: Sounds like it.

PL: She really is. She’s still really, really a strong woman. She’s been through a
lot and she has a lot of compassion for people because of what she’s been through
herself.

LC: Where did you go to high school?

PL: I went to high school in Red Bud, Illinois, which was a town about twelve
miles away from where I lived. There wasn’t a high school in the town I grew up in.

LC: And so was it Red Bud High School that you graduated from?

PL: Yes.

LC: What year?

PL: ’63.

LC: And did she graduate the same year that you did or the year after?

PL: I think it was the year after me.

LC: Okay. Coming out as a high school graduate in 1963, were you really
thinking that you needed to get married right away?

PL: Oh no.

LC: What did you think at the time?

(Laughter)

PL: I got a job and I started to work and I started to get kind of like this itching
ting thing to want to do something else. After working a year in St. Louis, which was about
fifty miles away, I decided, there has to be more to life than this, you know, getting up
and going to work everyday and this job, it was okay, but it wasn’t challenging. So, I started to make plans to go to college. On my own, I got scholarships and loans and grants and I got myself enrolled in a two-year college at Carbondale, Illinois, Southern Illinois University. At the time, they had a separate program called Vocational Technical Institute and I went there and got a two-year degree as a legal secretary.

LC: And how did you come to that particular program?

PL: You know, I don’t know. I think that in high school, I took business subjects and I really liked the business world or I thought the business world could offer me something rather than just getting married and being a housewife.

LC: Right.

PL: And my high school, it was either you’re in the academic track or you’re on a business track, and I pretty much didn’t even consider college because first of all, my family didn’t have the money.

LC: Yeah.

PL: And I didn’t think I could make it happen on my own, but I thought I could make two years of college happen. That I could go to college for two years and I could somehow figure out how to do that, but four years was more than I could take a leap at, so I stayed in the business track and then to be a legal secretary, was just like a normal progression. You know, because I did secretarial work when I graduated from high school and I liked it. I liked the involvement with people and I liked the productivity of it and I liked the business world and I like getting dressed up and going to work everyday, so I became a legal secretary.

LC: Did you get a job right away?

PL: Yeah, it was after my freshman year in college of that Vocational School that I went to Chicago and I met Howard. So, the fact that I had met a woman who invited me to go to Chicago for the summer was just so exciting to me because I had never really been out of southern Illinois. So she said, ‘Why don’t you come to Chicago and live with me and my family and you can work up there and then you can come back in the fall’, which is what I did. So, when I went back the second year, you know, Howard was very interested in pursuing a relationship with me and I kept saying, ‘I got to go back to school and finish my education.’
PL: So this whole second year was kind of...he was added to the mixed of me going to school and you know, training to be a legal secretary. He was added into the mix there. And so yeah, I did graduate and I got a job and I remember my starting salary, as a legal secretary was four hundred dollars a month. (Laughter) And I thought that I was a, you know...

LC: Right.

PL: A very rich woman.

LC: Yeah.

PL: Four hundred dollars a month.

LC: Quite a catch. (Laughter)

PL: Because I had doubled my salary. When I went to work out of high school, I was making 220 a month as this stenographer and now I had, you know, gotten four hundred dollars a month. I mean, I was on my way to the moon. (Laughter)

LC: Now tell me about Howard. First of all, what was his full name?

PL: Howard Emerson Querry, IV.

LC: Okay, and how do you spell Querry?

PL: Q-u-e-r-r-y.

LC: And tell me a little bit about him when you met him. What was he doing?

PL: He was working at a bank in Oakbrook, Illinois, which is a little suburb in northwestern Chicago, the northwestern suburbs. It was a brand new bank and he was the head teller there. And he was very dynamic and very good-looking and very...kind of like Frank Sinatra. That’s the closest analogy I can give to Howard. He reminded me a lot of Frank Sinatra, and I didn’t realize it until years later, but he was just cool and funny. He was just so, so funny. And, so you know, I met him...I mean, when I looked at him, I didn’t really notice him too much because I wasn’t really looking for a boyfriend. I was looking to make the most amount of money I could and you know, kind of like see Chicago and my girlfriend was going to show me Chicago and then, you know, I was going to go back. So, I don’t think I was actively looking for a boyfriend.

LC: Right.
PL: You know, I got a job at the bank, the same bank where he worked and it
was really a small bank. I mean, the lobby extended over into this same open area where
the officers had their desk and I got a job working for the Vice President of the bank. So,
Howard could look at me all day long. We were all in this great big room together.

LC: (Laughter) Right.

PL: So he would look at me and smile and you know, I would try to work and of
course, you know, he got my attention. Once he started paying attention to me, I started
paying attention back.

LC: Right. Tell me what you learned about his family. Where was he born?

PL: He was born in St. Louis. His father was in dental school I believe when he
was born. He was the first child in the family. His mother came from a Greek
background. Her name was Sotiropoulos, before she married Howard Querry. And his
father was in dental school and his mother’s two brothers were also in dental school I
believe at the same time. They were all in dental school together.

LC: Were they going to Washington University or…?

PL: No, St. Louis University.

LC: Okay.

PL: And so, she had her first child in dental school and then shortly after that, she
had another child, which was a girl, and then ultimately, Howard’s dad served in the
service. I’m not sure what branch of service he served in, but he did serve in the military
I believe as a dentist. I think it was after dental school, that he went into the service.

LC: I see.

PL: So he did the teeth. He fixed the teeth of the men in the military.

LC: And you mentioned that Howard had a younger sister.

PL: Yeah, Connie is her name.

LC: Did you meet her while you guys were dating?

PL: Yeah, at some point I did meet her. I don’t remember when.

LC: Did you form any kind of relationship with her?

PL: Somewhat, but it was mostly superficial. It wasn’t intimate at all.

LC: Okay. What year did you actually meet him then; ’64 or…?

PL: I met Howard in the summer of ’65.
LC: Okay. And tell me how things progressed. Did you get married very quickly or…?

PL: Oh, no, not really. We met in the summer of ’65, and started dating and at the time, there was another man I had met that I was dating also. So, I was dating Howard and this other man. And pretty much, that was how I wanted it. I didn’t want to get really emotionally involved with anyone. So, by the end of the summer after dating both of those guys, and it felt like there was a tug of war going on, that they both really wanted to get to know me better, Howard won out over the other guy. And I told both of them that I was going back to school at the end of the summer and that you know, I would stay in touch with them, but I wasn’t going to be around anymore. So, what happened was within shortly after I went back to Carbondale at the end of the summer, Bob was the other guy I was dating. Bob came to see me and really wanted me to like I don’t know, go steady or I don’t know, get engaged or something and I said, ‘You know, I’m not really in a position to do this.’ He was much older than me. I was about nineteen and he was like twenty-six.

LC: Okay, right.

PL: I said, ‘You know, I don’t want that.’ So, I chased him away and then he wrote me this really, really beautiful goodbye letter in which he quoted The Prophet by…Kahlil Gibran’s book about love. Oh, I remember reading the letter and thinking, ‘Why am I chasing this man away?’

LC: I’m out of my mind. (Laughing)

PL: He would’ve been a good catch.

LC: Yes.

PL: You know, and then of course, Howard who was persistent, would not let go. He started coming down to Carbondale like once a month to see me.

LC: Really?

PL: ‘What’re you doing this weekend? I want to come down.’ I’m like, ‘Well, I got studying to do.’ He was really persistent and kind of edgy and pushy and it just kind of, you know, was very persistent. So, I continued to see him and it wasn’t until like late 1967 that we finally got married.

LC: Okay. Now, he had received draft orders in there somewhere, is that right?
PL: Yeah, what happened was he was working at the bank and the whole Vietnam War was heating up?

LC: Yes.

PL: So, his father and his two uncles had some kind of connections at St. Louis University, because they had both graduated, they had all three graduated from dental school there.

LC: Sure.

PL: So, they somehow got him enrolled in St. Louis University. So, he was going to St. Louis University then and coming down to Carbondale to see me on weekends and sometimes he’d take me up to St. Louis and I’d stay in the girls dorm and he’d show me St. Louis. So, he was in school, but what he did was he didn’t maintain his grades, you know. St. Louis University wasn’t the kind of school that was easy.

LC: Right.

PL: And it wasn’t the kind of school you could kind of fake your way through. So, he flunked out. Basically, he was kicked out, dismissed because of low grades and he didn’t apply himself and yet, there was so much he had at stake, you know. He had a lot at stake there, but he still couldn’t apply himself, he couldn’t study. I don’t know what he was doing to tell the truth. So, anyways, what he did was then when he got kicked out of St. Louis University, he moved to Carbondale where I was in school and got a job as a retail clerk in a grocery store, which as I think about it now, is so odd. That’s what my father did.

LC: Yeah.

PL: So here’s Howard, working in a grocery store and for him, it was like he could give a damn what he did, he just wanted to be near me.

LC: Right, that was the priority.

PL: That was the priority; I don’t care what else happens. So, I mean, he was only in Carbondale a couple of months until he got his draft notice, and when he got his draft notice, he went to a recruiter and the recruiter promised him that if he enlisted for an additional year, that he would never have to be in combat. That he would be guaranteed an administrative job. So, he did, he enlisted. And it was from Carbondale that he left and went to Basic training at Ft. Leonard Wood.
LC: Do you remember this time period very clearly Pauline?
PL: Well, I don’t know, it depends on what you ask me to see how much I remember.

LC: Okay, for example, his visit to the recruiter, did he discuss that with you beforehand or after it happened?
PL: I don’t remember.
LC: And tell you what he had been told?
PL: You know, I don’t think he asked me for help in making the decision. But I remember that it seemed like a way out. It seemed like a promise that even if he did have to go to Vietnam, that he wouldn’t be in the frontlines. It was like a promise, like a carrot in front of us, you know.

LC: Right, ‘Do this and you’ll be in safe’ kind of thing.
PL: Yeah. And so we thought, well, it’s worth the extra year for him to serve, because you know this will save his life.’ Like, I think, probably still happens with recruiters.

LC: Probably.
PL: Yeah.

LC: How much attention had you been paying to the Vietnam conflict yourself; any, anything?
PL: Well, it’s not like I was the kind of person that followed that kind of stuff.
LC: Sure.

PL: Because I was on a college campus and the fact that I was on a college campus kind of put it in my face because it was just everywhere. You know, there weren’t protests at that time. The protests happened later after my husband was killed. When I went back to Carbondale, that’s when they were protesting the war, but before my husband went, if I remember correctly, there weren’t any protests in 1965. But it felt like this inferno that was heating up and heating up and heating up and like it was going to get us all…all of us in that age group and what could we do to put the flames out in this inferno. That’s what it felt like, like it’s going to get us, it’s going to get us, it’s going to get us. And so this was the recruiters saying that he told Howard, ‘You know, if you’re willing to give us an extra year, you can go to Officer Candidate School, you
know, you’ll have an administrative job, your wife can go with you, you know, wherever you’re stationed. You won’t be in a combat zone.’ I mean, just one thing after another. Painted a glorious picture of how we could avoid the whole Vietnam fear that was building and escalating.

LC: When things did not work out that way, did he or you feel or express resentment about what you had been told, what he had been told?

PL: Well, every time Howard would get new orders, he would go wherever he was stationed and he would say, ‘But what about this guarantee that I have? I got this guarantee when I enlisted.’ And he would never get anywhere; he would just get a run around about it. There was never any backup, you know, any backup follow through. Howard carried that guarantee around in his wallet and every time he got orders for the next thing, he’d pull it out and nothing would happen. And you know, that guarantee was in his wallet when it came back from Vietnam after he was killed. He was still carrying the guarantee around in his wallet.

LC: Pauline, let me ask a little bit about his reporting to Basic training. Do you know when he actually reported? Was it in ’66?

PL: I think it was August of…let’s see, August of…it would’ve been ’66 I guess.

LC: Okay.

PL: August of ’66, because we met in ’65. It was a year later in August that he got on a train in Carbondale and went to Ft. Leonard Wood for Basic training.

LC: And, did he write to you during that time period or call you?

PL: Oh yeah, he called me all the time. When he was close enough, he called me all the time and wrote also.

LC: Okay.

PL: But you know, I don’t know where those letters are. Those letters could possibly be in my mother’s things that…when my mother died, they cleaned out her house and some of those letters could still be in there, I don’t know.

LC: Okay. How did he do with basic training just generally? Do you remember, did he fall in okay or was it…?

PL: Well, he made remarks about how they take your identity away. They shave your head and they…it’s kind of like when you become a nun or a monk in a Buddhist
tradition. They take away all your individuality and you just become one of a unit and he
did comment about how he felt like that was kind of shocking in the beginning, but he
was the kind of guy that really did well in a structured environment.

LC: Okay.

PL: You know, if somebody put him in a place and told him when to do and what
to do it and there was no alternative, he did pretty well. And the Army was like that, so
in some ways, it was an ideal place for him. You know, jump here, do this, do that. He
didn’t have to manage his own time, he didn’t have to, you know, set goals. It was a plan
that was laid out for him.

LC: Yeah.

PL: So, in many ways, the military was perfect for him. He always had a really
lighthearted attitude about it. You know, what he showed to me was that he never took
anything too seriously. He’d always joke about everything. He was very comical and
had a great sense of humor and everything was funny. I mean, even in Vietnam, the
letters he wrote home, he was, ‘I’m too skinny to get shot. They’ll never shoot me, I’m
just too skinny.’ You know, that’s how he was about everything and part of me delighted
in that and part of me wanted to hear more of what was really he was worried about, but
he never really shared that with me.

LC: Never?

PL: Not hardly ever. I mean, only in the form of, you know, he’d have
nightmares sometimes after we were married and his training was increasing and he’d
have like these nightmares in the middle of the night and he’d start wrestling with me and
fighting with me and I would say, ‘Wake up, what’s going on with you?’ And he was
having nightmares about being in Vietnam and he wasn’t even there yet. And so that’s
how I kind of intuitively figured out that this guy is more stressed out than he’s telling
me. And I found out later that before he went to Vietnam, he told his aunt that he was
going to come back in two months in a box and he came back in two months in a box.
And she told me that about five years ago when I went to St. Louis. She told me that and
I was shocked to hear that. I had never heard that before.

LC: Did he have a particularly close relationship with her?
PL: I think he did, yeah. I think he was closer to his two aunts than he was to his mom. I don’t know, I don’t think he would ever say that to his mom. But his aunts were more like his peers.

LC: I see.

PL: And I think he told them more the truth of what was true for him.

LC: What was going on.

PL: Yeah. I think he tried to protect his mother as he tried to protect me. And he would never say that to me. You know, all he said to me was, ‘This is going to go really quickly. You know, we have our whole lives ahead of us and you know, don’t worry about me. I’m too skinny to get shot. This is going to be….‘

LC: Just keeping it light.

PL: Yeah, totally keeping it light. The only way I knew he was stressed out was the nightmares like I said.

LC: Yeah. He did go to advance training out in California?

PL: Yeah, Ft. Ord. He went to advance infantry training at Ft. Ord, and then he got accepted into OCS, which for him, was a dream come true because, you know, I think Howard was always interested in proving to his parents that he could be successful and getting accepted into OCS was, you know, a step in that direction because his dad had been an officer, but his dad got there the easy way. He didn’t go through OCS. I think he went through ROTC in college and he got commissioned when he graduated.

LC: Right out of school.

PL: Yeah, Howard went the hard way. He went through the OCS training. So, he was thrilled when he got accepted to OCS.

LC: Now, was your marriage soon around that time that he graduated from OCS?

PL: Well actually, he never graduated from OCS.

LC: Oh okay, what happened?

PL: After eighteen weeks, which is about two-thirds of the program, he called me one night and he was really, really depressed and he had invited me down for a graduation party or some kind of party that they were having. It was like maybe halfway through OCS or three-fourths of the way, so they were having a big fancy party and so I had plane tickets to go to Georgia to Ft. Benning for this big party and I bought a new
dress and so he called and he was just so depressed and I said, ‘What is wrong?’ And he said, ‘I got kicked out of OCS. I’m not going to finish OCS.’ And I said, ‘Why?’ And he said, ‘They told me I wasn’t forceful enough to be an infantry officer.’ And I said, ‘Well, then we can’t get married. We cannot live on an enlisted man salary, so we can’t get married.’ And he got really depressed then.

LC: I’ll bet.

PL: He said, ‘You can’t do this. Please marry me.’ So, I went to the weekend in Georgia, the night of the dance, you know, we had dinner, a dance, and then he borrowed somebody’s car, he took me out for a drive to this hillside, and we got out of the car and we walked over the hillside and there was, you know, a thousand stars and a big moon and he said, ‘Will you marry me, even though I’m not going to finish OCS?’ He said, I’m trying to remember, something about, ‘I want to take those stars and put those stars in your pocket’ or something like that. He was very romantic. You know, he was going to put all the stars in my pocket, and of course, I fell for it. ‘Oh yes I’ll marry you. Absolutely.’

LC: Your resolve had disappeared.

(Laughter)

PL: Yes, my resolve had disappeared. The man had succeeded.

LC: Right.

PL: And so, that was the weekend and then I came home and my mother and I started planning a wedding because it was like...he was going to go, when he got kicked out of OCS, he didn’t have a choice. They told him he was going to the NCO Academy and then after that, he would go to Ft. Jackson, South Carolina for training for Vietnam. So, you know, we got married knowing that he was ultimately going to go to Vietnam. And so we came home and planned a wedding really quick. I’m sure everybody thought I was pregnant, but I wasn’t. And then he came home for the weekend, we got married, and we went back to Ft. Benning so he could finish his training in the NCO Academy.

LC: How was he doing with having been basically booted out of the OCS School? I mean, was looking forward to the wedding with you kind of allowed him to like shift his perspective so that he wasn’t hurt so much about what had happened in OCS?
PL: Yeah, he didn’t really…I mean, his disappointment, as I remember correctly, he was only disappointed briefly. It seemed to me like his ultimately goal was to get married to me and that OCS was just a way to make that happen. So, I think when I…he didn’t share his disappointment at length with me, and it was kind of like the way Howard was. You know, when things didn’t go as he planned, he would be upset for a while, and then he would just shake it off and make a joke about it.

LC: And be on to the next.

PL: Yeah, and be on to the next challenge, you know, whatever it might be. So, he didn’t dwell in disappointment a lot, which was really a good thing about him.

LC: And how long was he in Columbia, South Carolina? Were you able to go with him?

PL: Yeah, he came home when he was in the NCO training, and we got married on a Saturday and we had to report back within a couple of days and I was able to go with him for a while to Ft. Benning. And then…you know, I can’t remember the length of time, maybe two or three months at Ft. Jackson and I think at Ft. Jackson was when he was having the nightmares really bad. Almost every night, was you know, wrestling around and screaming and what I know now is that the subconscious stuff comes up when you sleep. So, whatever he was trying to bury in his subconscious was spilling out into his life, you know, with me and it was then that I started writing letters to my mom saying…you know, and I do have some of those letters. I don’t know where they are, but that might be another thing…a group of letters that I would ask my daughter about if she wants, but I remember writing home to my mother and saying, ‘You know, Howard doesn’t talk about his fear of going to Vietnam, but I know he’s so scared because he has nightmares every night.’

LC: Were you, Pauline, starting to pay more attention to the news about Vietnam since you knew that Howard was going to be going over there?

PL: Oh yeah, it just became a bigger inferno, like I said, you know, it was like this inferno that was…I mean, the closer he got to leaving, the more fearful I became. And it was like this hell that was engulfing us and there really was no way out now. It was just a walk through the fire basically and that we were going to walk through this fire together, we were. But as it turned out, I feel like I walked through the fire alone.
LC: Why is that?

[Pause]

LC: Go ahead Pauline.

PL: So, I feel like I walked through the fire alone because, you know, Howard was in the fire in Vietnam for two months, but the fire that I have walked through has lasted thirty-five years. You know, his death, the birth of my daughter, raising my daughter alone, living in denial of my grief; that’s the fire and the hell that I have walked through for thirty-five years. And, at some level on a good day, I can believe that Howard has been there in some way with me, but if he has been, for most of my life, I haven’t been aware of his guidance and his support. It’s only been in the last ten years that I have felt like there was something that was with me all along that was helping me get through it.

LC: And it’s more retrospective than something you felt at the time.

PL: Yeah, as I look back now, I can see, oh you know, I survived those difficult days, there must’ve been some kind of force that was with me in some way. Yeah, but at the time, I didn’t feel that there was anyone that knew my pain, anyone that could allow me to cry. There just wasn’t anyone.

LC: And you were also, as you mentioned, responsible for your daughter.

PL: Yeah.

LC: Which is a whole other dimension.

PL: It’s a whole other dimension that happened that we haven’t discussed yet.

How did I happen to become pregnant during all this?

LC: Well let me ask you first; were you aware that you were pregnant by the time that Howard left for Vietnam?

PL: Oh yeah.

LC: Okay, and when did he actually leave?

PL: He left in March, right around the first of March 1968.

LC: Had you been aware then of, for example, the TET Offensive?

PL: I don’t know if I was aware of it or not. I know that there was so much fear that towards the end, it was just like the two of us were kind of like, you know, ‘Let’s just get through this as quickly as possible.’ This saying goodbye kind of a thing. But you
know, I don’t remember actually in January hearing about the TET Offensive. It’s only been in recent years that I look back in history and say…well actually, when I went to the website of his unit, I saw how many people were killed in January of ’68. That’s when the TET Offensive happened.

LC: Yes.

PL: And there’s like many, many, many men that died in the TET Offensive, and then he left in March and he died in what they called Mini-TET, which was in May of ’68. They had a Mini-TET, which is what it was called and that’s when he died.

LC: And what unit was he actually assigned to?

PL: He was Company A, 3rd Battalion, 39th Infantry, 9th Infantry Division.

LC: And, do you know where he was posted when he first arrived in country?

PL: When he first went there, I think he landed at Long Binh and then he went to Bien Hoa.

LC: Okay.

PL: And then we went to this French fort called Ft. Courage, and it was near Saigon and it was surrounded by a moat and he said that as long as they were at that old French fort, Ft. Courage, that he felt safe there.

LC: What was he doing? Do you know?

PL: He was…well, what they would do is they would go out during the day on these reconnaissance missions, whatever that means.

LC: Right.

PL: They would go out and I guess look for the enemy.

LC: Yes.

PL: And search around and if they found them, shoot them and then they’d come back to the French fort at night. But when he died, he wrote to me that they were leaving the fort for an extended period of time. It wasn’t just going to be a day trip; they were leaving for several days to go to Saigon. So, one of his last letters he wrote, you know, ‘We’re leaving the French fort and I don’t know if I’ll be able to write you. You know, I’ll write you when I come back. I don’t know how long we’re going to be there, but it’s going to be more than a day trip.’ And that’s the weekend that he died. It was Mother’s Day Weekend.
LC: Where were you living?
PL: I was living with my parents back in Prairie Du Rocher, Illinois because pretty much Howard decided…I don’t think I would’ve chosen to go back to my parents, but Howard decided that since I was pregnant, that would be a good place for me to be. So, he kind of persuaded me. He was very persuasive, you know, like he persuaded me to marry him.
LC: Right.
PL: He persuaded me that was the best place for me to be. So I was living back with my parents in southern Illinois.
LC: How was that going before…?
PL: Well, if I remember correctly, my father was in a period of sobriety, so he was…my father also had detached retina, and he had lost his vision.
LC: Okay.
PL: So, he lost total vision in one eye and then partial vision in the other, so he couldn’t hardly see and I think that probably had affected his getting drunk. So, he was in a prolonged period of sobriety and so my father and I actually were kind of close during that time. He wasn’t working and he was on disability and my mother was working. So, he and I were like together during the day and then my mother would come home at night. And it was kind of okay. It was much better than it was when my father was drinking a lot.
LC: Sure.
PL: So it was kind of okay and it was really…actually, as I look back now, it was a good place for me to be because my parents didn’t charge me any rent, I could stay there, and I didn’t have to worry about money. You know, when I read my letters that I wrote to Howard, it so much was about money. I was always worried about money so much and I remember that, you know, because I didn’t have to pay rent there, I didn’t have to worry about money.
LC: Right, so it removed some source of worry that you had.
PL: Right.
LC: And it was fairly calm you said.
PL: Yeah, it was calm as I remember now.
LC: Where was your mom working?
PL: She worked at a local grocery store.
LC: Okay.
PL: She was like a meat cutter. She worked in the meat department. So she was
gone like from eight to five every day.
LC: And were they generally supportive of your having been married and excited
about your pregnancy?
PL: Oh yeah, they were really excited that, you know, I would be there and have
the baby. They were just really excited about it.
LC: Okay, so this was all pretty positive.
PL: Yeah.
LC: Okay.
PL: I mean, they really liked Howard a lot and my mother was thrilled that I was
pregnant.
LC: And Pauline, I know this would be difficult, and of course, just tell me what
you can about finding out what had happened with Howard.
PL: Well, it actually began the weekend of Mother’s Day. Mother’s Day was on
Sunday and I think it was, I don’t know, sometime that weekend when I picked up the
paper…I really made a habit of not reading the paper because the paper was full of the
news of the war and I already knew my husband was in war. I didn’t really want to read
about it because it just increased my anxiety. So I pretty much ignored the paper. And
the same way with television, my father was an avid T.V. watcher, so I always saw the
fighting because my father had the T.V. on. You know, the evening news was on every
night.
LC: Right.
PL: But what happened was I somehow picked up the Sunday paper or some
paper, I’m not sure what day it was and literally found this article. It wasn’t on the front
page or anything, it was kind of way in the back pages of the newspaper and it was like I
was drawn, some force was drawing me to this article and I read about it and it was about
a battle in Vietnam and it was about my husband’s unit. And when I read it, I had this
realization that my husband was dead and it was kind of like…it was an intuitive thing. It
was like I didn’t know how I knew it, but I just knew it and I just started sobbing and my mother was in the kitchen. I remember I was sitting outside in the backyard under the Sycamore tree and she came out and said, ‘What is the matter?’ And I said, ‘Howard is dead, I know it.’ And I was sobbing and crying and she said, ‘Don’t be silly. How do you know it?’ And I showed her the article and she read the article and then she just went back in the kitchen and then it was business as usual. You know, that’s how my family was. It’s just, ‘Okay, what’s next? What’s the next thing to do?’ And then that whole weekend, I was suffering from really bad anxiety. By that time, I was seven months pregnant.

LC: Yes.

PL: And I couldn’t sleep because intuitively, I knew that he was dead and the baby was just turning around and moving a lot and I was really scared because I thought that I was going to have the baby early and I was trying to like calm myself down because I didn’t want the baby to come early, but I knew that he was dead, so it was a very, very traumatic few days. And I wrote him a letter every day during this time and I just recently reread those letters and I was just trying to tell him the trauma that I was going through. ‘I’m so worried, they’re fighting in Saigon. You said you were leaving the French fort, I’m sure you’re there.’ I didn’t really say, ‘I read about a battle and I think you’re dead.’ I just kept writing the letters because I was refusing to accept this feeling that I had that he was dead and the only defense I had against this feeling was write him another letter. So I was writing like two or three letters a day during that weekend. Well, he died on May 10 and then on May 15, five days later, my mother had just gotten home from work from the grocery store and she was fixing dinner and I was standing in the family room looking out the front windows and my father was watching the evening news and I saw this green Army car pull up in front of the house and my heart starting racing and pounding and I knew that they were coming to tell me that he was dead. And I told my mother that there were was an Army car out in the front and then the dog, Howard had gotten this dog before he went to Vietnam, the dog started barking and I took the dog and put the dog in the basement and went to the front door. It took these guys a long time to get out of the car and come to the front door. It was like they just kept sitting in the car and sitting in the car and sitting in the car. And of course,
I was going through a lot of anxiety. Finally, they came to the door and I went to the door and they said, ‘We’re looking for Pauline Querry.’ And I said, ‘That’s me.’ And then they just looked at me and they saw that I was pregnant. It was pretty obvious that I was pregnant.

LC: Sure.

PL: And I don’t think I invited them in. I think I just… I started saying to them, ‘Is he dead or wounded? Is he dead or wounded?’ And they didn’t answer me. And finally, probably my mother invited them in and then they kind of read this thing to me. They didn’t really speak it, they read it like it was a script and they said you know, ‘We regret to inform you that your husband has been fatally wounded’ or ‘mortally wounded.’ They didn’t say ‘Dead’, and I was in such a state of trauma, that I didn’t hear the word ‘Dead’, so I kept hanging on to the hope that maybe he’s injured and I kept saying, ‘Is he injured or is he dead? Is he injured or is he dead?’ And they wouldn’t give me a straight answer. It was just so frustrating for me. And finally at some level, they read it again and I don’t even think they ever said, ‘Dead’, but at some level, my mother said to me, ‘Honey, he’s dead.’ You know, she didn’t say it that way, but somehow I got it that he was dead and then I went into this foggy place of non-reality.

LC: Right.

PL: And I can just remember bits and pieces of words like ‘medals’ and ‘funeral’ and ‘arrangements’ and you know, just words. I remember words, but I don’t remember… and I remember just sitting there trying to maintain some degree of sanity when I wanted to just explode myself in emotion and just trying to stay… hold it together while these guys were still there. So, they delivered all the information they needed to deliver, kind of like they were delivering a script to me, and then they got up and left and it was then that I went into my bedroom and I got my dog and I went into my bedroom where I was sleeping when I was there at my parents house and I shut the door and I said, ‘Just leave me alone.’ And I remember throwing myself on the bed and of course, then the baby really started kicking and squirming and I was just…I felt like my life had just blown up. Like literally, somebody had just thrown a grenade into the middle of my life and I felt like I couldn’t breathe. I did not know how I was going to survive. And then I remember at some point, I came out of my room and my mother had invited all these
relatives over. So I had to walk out and be with all these relatives at a time when I really just wanted to be alone. My brothers and sisters that lived close by, my aunts and uncles, it’s like they all came over to my house.

LC: Was having them all around just another thing you had to like handle?
PL: Yeah. I don’t remember it being comforting because my family, both my mother and my father could not be with the experience of deep emotions. So, around them, I couldn’t emote. I had to go shut myself up in my room to cry. So when I walked out of that room, I had to be strong again. My mother and father gave me no permission to be emotional because neither one of them had permission to be emotional. So I had to walk out and be the stoic war widow the minute I walked out of that room and I spent about twenty-five years being the stoic war widow. It cost me a lot.

LC: Pauline, did the delivery of your baby go well? Were you in physical condition to actually have that go all right?
PL: You know, it did go okay. It was my first child and I had a really good doctor and there was a natural delivery. I didn’t have any medication.

LC: Wow.
PL: You know, for the first child, it was pretty smooth. I was only really in intense labor for like two hours. And my daughter was born, and you know, at the time I thought, ‘God, I hope she’s normal because she’s been through this trial with me.’ And I thought, you know, I thought she would be normal because she looked normal. I didn’t realize the emotional impact it had on her, but she had ten fingers and ten toes and a head and all the things that a baby was supposed to have.

LC: Had you and Howard decided if it was a girl, what you would name her or did you have to do that by yourself?
PL: No, we had decided.

LC: Really?
PL: Yes. So Howard and I picked her name before I had her.

LC: Was it his choice?
PL: His choice to what?

LC: Had he selected the name and you had agreed or…?
PL: You know, I don’t remember how that happened, but it was a name we both agreed on. It was Michelle and then the middle name was Howard’s grandmother’s name, he was really close to his maternal grandmother. And so Marie was her middle name. We named her after his maternal grandmother.

LC: Very nice, very nice. Had you in the interim had to deal with the Army at all around for example, Howard’s body being brought back to the states or…?

PL: Yeah, I had communication with whoever it was that I communicated with about how that would happen and I was told that I needed to give the Army the funeral director because when Howard’s body arrived, they would just notify the funeral director and then the funeral director would notify me that he was going to pick up Howard’s body and that’s pretty much how it happened.

LC: And did you get to decide then, did you actually get to decide where Howard would be buried?

PL: No I didn’t decide. Howard’s parents told me that they would like to bury him in their family plot. They had a family plot. I didn’t have any place to bury Howard. I could’ve buried him, you know, in the small town where I grew up, but that had nothing to do with his family, so I just said, ‘It’s fine, you know, you can bury him where you want to bury him.’ And they said they wanted to bury him in their family plot in Springfield, Illinois at the same cemetery where Abe Lincoln is buried.

LC: Yes.

PL: And that’s where their family plot was and they said that they wanted to bury him extra deep so that when I died, I could be buried on top of him. I said, ‘That’s fine.’ Thinking, ‘Of course I will be buried on top of him.’ I was happy they made that concession.

LC: What was your relationship like with them over this time period? Do you even remember dealing with them at all? I mean, had you had much of a relationship with them?

PL: It was always very artificial and very strange and it was pretty much I intuitively felt that they thought that I wasn’t good enough for their son. That’s how I always felt that they felt about me.

LC: Wow.
PL: Yes, so it was pretty strained. They were in a different social class than I was. Howard’s father was a dentist like I said, and my father owned a retail grocery store. And I was painfully aware of the difference in our economic life, you know, economic family situation and often felt when I was at Howard’s house, that my clothes weren’t good enough. Howard was deeply in love with me, but it was my own lack of self confidence that kind of made me feel that way and as it turned out, that pretty much was true, but I didn’t find out till years later after I’d written my book, the true feelings that they had for me, they actually wrote them in a letter and they told me. But it was pretty much strained. But, you know, I saw them after Howard went to Vietnam; I saw them maybe once or twice and then the whole notification of Howard’s death happened very awkwardly. The Army couldn’t find me, they were looking for me at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina because they thought I still lived there and when they couldn’t find me after three days, they called Howard’s parents and told Howard’s parents that he had been killed in Vietnam and did Howard’s parents know where I was. So, Howard’s parents were notified first, and they were instructed not to call me because the Army had to notify me. So, when I called them after I found out Howard died, they already knew and I felt this deep betrayal.

LC: Yes.

PL: That they knew and they didn’t tell me and they had known for a couple of days and that was just a deeper cut of the… the whole thing with them was painful and so after Howard’s death and I had my daughter, I made a point of taking my daughter to Chicago so they could get to know her. So, for the first couple of years of my daughter’s life, I did it for Howard. I didn’t necessarily do it for them. I did it because I thought that’s what Howard would want.

LC: Yes.

PL: But ultimately, I moved away from Illinois and then I didn’t feel obligated to do that anymore.

LC: Did they return affection to your daughter during that time period?

PL: Well, my daughter used to always complain, when she was old enough she would say… when I told her we were going to see them, she’d get a stomach ache.

LC: Wow.
PL: I realize now that the stomach ache was her anxiety about being around them because she, I think she felt the same way that I did. Not good enough, inadequate, whatever.

LC: Wow. And does she have much of a relationship with his family as an adult, she’s an adult now obviously?

PL: She has a relationship with Howard’s sister. They talk on the phone and Howard’s sister sends presents, birthday presents to my daughter’s two children. Recently, she got a call from Howard’s mother saying that Howard’s father was dying and he wanted to talk to her and basically Howard’s dad just said, ‘I love you and I love your two kids.’ Because he’s close to death right now. But a couple of years ago when my daughter had her first child, she went to Denver to a family wedding with Howard’s family and she brought her first child there and I said, ‘Oh, they’re going to be so happy to see their son’s grandchild.’ You know, I said, ‘They’re going to make a big deal out of this.’ And when Michelle returned from Denver, she said, ‘Mom, they didn’t make a big deal out of it.’ She said, ‘You fabricate all that in your imagination because you want it to be that way, but that’s not the way that it is.’ And she was deeply disappointed that they didn’t make a big deal out of it. She said they treated her just like she was another kid and they were more worried about her spilling something on the carpet than they were about who she was.

LC: Oh wow.

PL: I was so disappointed when I heard that because I think my daughter has somehow looked to her grandparents for some kind of recognition that she never got from her father of course.

LC: Sure.

PL: And I think that she must be disappointed about that.

LC: And Pauline, you’re an expert in these things now, I mean, is it your sense that some of that on their part is coming from their own sort of denial and…

PL: Absolutely.

LC: Inability to cope with their own loss and recognizing her and her child as just an extension of, you know, would require something they just don’t have.
PL: I think that Howard had a relationship with his parents, which was very superficial.

LC: Yeah.

PL: I think he was really close to his maternal grandmother and I think he could be emotional with his maternal grandmother. I think he had the same relationship with his parents, but I did...he couldn’t express emotions around them. I don’t think they’re capable of deep emotions. I don’t think they know what that realm of life is, and I think, that you know, when they lost their son, it was like they shut the door to something and I don’t think they ever opened it again.

LC: Yeah, that’s sort of what it sounds like.

PL: Yeah.

LC: Yeah, then that way, Michelle is sort of just knocking her head against a wall in a way.

PL: Yeah, in many ways it’s like, you know, there’s a big void in Michelle, no father and I think she’s tried to fill that void with maybe his parents and she seems to have a pretty good relationship with Howard’s sister, Connie, but again, I don’t know how emotional it is. I don’t know if they go into the emotional realm or if it’s just chatting about children. I don’t know.

LC: Well, Pauline, you referred earlier to having spent basically twenty-five years in your own kind of stoic, sort of cope, you know, coping or maybe non-coping.

PL: Yeah, that’s more like it.

LC: Yeah, and I wonder if you can just describe about how those years sort of set themselves up for you. What did you do to take care of yourself and your daughter and how did that work with what you were feeling?

PL: Well, first of all, when Howard’s body came back from Vietnam, we could not open the coffin. And I was not told why. I was just told that I could not open the coffin.

LC: Was it sealed?

PL: It wasn’t permanently sealed, no.

LC: Okay.
PL: But we were told that it was non-viewable, which means, ‘Don’t look at the body.’ So, I remember my brother at the time, my youngest brother said to me, ‘If you want, I will open the coffin and identify Howard’s body if you want me to. He had been in the Marine Corps and I think he felt it was his duty to do it. And I said, ‘You don’t have to do that.’ But because I didn’t see Howard’s dead body, I hung onto some ray of hope that possibly it could’ve been a mistake. So, I went to the funeral, I went to the cemetery, we put the coffin in the ground, and I didn’t know that I was doing this, but in retrospect, I pretended he was still alive. And so, everything that reminded me of Vietnam, I couldn’t be with. The box that came back with all of his things, I put those things…I got it at the Post Office, put it all in cardboard boxes, stuck it away in the bottom of the closet and never looked at it. And I left it in the closet until I would move, and I moved frequently. I kept moving, trying to get away from the pain that would well up inside of me. You know, when you moved, your whole life gets torn apart, you have to start all over again.

LC: Yes.

PL: So I kept starting all over again and that kept me busy, so I didn’t have to open that box and look at it. And so every time I would move, I would drag the box to the next place and put it way out of sight, so I didn’t have to look at it. Way in the back, recesses of closets, and every time the topic of Vietnam would come up, I would disappear, get silent, go run away and hide, not talk about it. People asked me where my husband was, I would try to avoid answering because when I did answer and say, ‘He died in Vietnam’, it would be like dropping a grenade in the middle of a conversation. People were just stunned. They did not know how to respond and I learned really early in my life to have everybody else be more important than me. So everybody else’s feelings were more important than mine, so I denied my feelings and I kept shut about Vietnam. I kept quiet about Vietnam, the fact that I was a widow. I carried it all in myself. And this went on from 1968 until 1990 and 1990, I quit a job that was really important to me and I ended a relationship with a man that was really important and I didn’t know what happened to me, but I actually stopped bathing and stopped brushing my teeth and couldn’t get out of bed and became suicidal. That was in 1990. And again, I didn’t know what was wrong with me, but there was something in me that told me to go to an Army
base and to see a psychiatrist. So, I found my way to...by this time, I was living in
California. I found my way to Letterman Army Hospital in San Francisco and I went to
see a psychiatrist...made an appointment to see a psychiatrist. He was dressed in full
Army uniform. I remember walking in the room and looking at his uniform and just
freaking out and telling him, you know, ‘I want to die. I want to kill myself and I don’t
know why.’ And it was then that he asked me a bunch of questions and told me that I
was clinically depressed and that if I took these pills, I would get better. So I went home
and I took the pills and three months later, I was still suicidal and I was seeing him like
once a week and he kept waiting for me to change my mood and it didn’t change. So
after three months, he weaned me off of those pills and started me on new pills and about
six months after that, I started to see a ray of hope in my life again and it was then that I
started to want to live and changed my mind that maybe I didn’t want to die.

LC: Pauline, how are you getting yourself, if you remember, to the
appointments? What was motivating it since everything else was kind of falling by the
wayside?

PL: It was my daughter. It was the fact that even though I was in so much pain, I
wanted to die. I knew that it wasn’t just me and if it weren’t for my daughter, I probably
would’ve committed suicide. I’m sure of it, but I knew that my daughter already had no
father and that if I committed suicide, I would take away the only parent she had and I
knew I couldn’t do that. So, you know, I would drive down to San Francisco through the
traffic and go to these appointments. It was really her that kept me going and it was her
that kept me going all those years when I really wanted to die also. And, you know, I’ve
been committing suicide slowly for all those years, but I did it through my addictions.
Addictions are like a slow suicide, but when I got to 1990, it was like…I wasn’t on the
slow path to suicide anymore; I was on a fast track.

LC: Right.

PL: I was going to do it quick and I had it all planned and how I was going to do
it and I think the pivotal thing that happened was one day, I used to call my daughter and
tell her how much pain I was in. She was really the only person I would talk to anymore
and one day she said to me, ‘You know Mom, I can’t stop you from committing suicide.
That’s your decision, I really can’t intervene; I can’t do anything about it. I can’t watch
you twenty-four hours a day.’ But she said, ‘I’ll tell you one thing, suicide is not
something you can change your mind about and if you do it, you’ll miss my wedding and
you’ll miss knowing my children.’ And I think that deeply affected me and that’s when I
realized that it wasn’t just me and my pain, that I had to find a way to release this pain, to
get through it because I could not do that to my daughter. And so I took the medication
and I got into therapy and I started for the first time talking to a therapist. She would just
let me come one hour a week and I would talk about Howard and I would cry. It was the
first time anybody let me cry. It was the first time anybody asked me questions about
Howard. It was the first time anybody wanted to know what it was like for me.

LC: This therapist that you were seeing then was someone, clearly was someone
different than the person at Letterman that you had seen initially?
PL: Oh yeah.
LC: So, was he…the fellow that you saw at first who was very much pro giving
you anti-depressants or whatever, was he helpful in any way other than getting some
meds straightened out for you?
PL: No, he was not the kind of person that I could emotionally emit with. But I
had enough…you know, once I got on the medication, I started figuring out that I needed
to see a therapist other than him, so I found a woman here in Santa Rosa. She’s a
marriage and family counselor.
LC: How’d you find her?
PL: She was giving a talk somewhere and I went to hear her speak and I just
knew intuitively that, you know, I wanted to work with her.
LC: No kidding?
PL: Yeah.
LC: What was it…can you describe what you saw that resonated such that you
knew, ‘Yes, this is the person.’
PL: She had shared some of her life experience and traumatic things that had
happened to her and I knew because of her trauma that she would be able to hear my
trauma. And she was someone I wanted to become. I looked at her and I thought, ‘I
want to become that woman. I want to become who she is.’ She was self-confident, she
was compassionate, she was gentle and sweet and soft. At the time, I was very hard and
frozen and solid. She was everything I wanted to be and she had spoke about surviving
her own trauma.

LC: And did you have any difficulty getting into see her as one of her clients or
was she able to…?

PL: No, it was easy. The difficulty came with convincing the Army that I would
benefit from working with her.

LC: Okay, and why did they have to be convinced of that?

PL: Because the Army is the way the Army is. I mean, you know, that’s a good
question. I think the Army would’ve allowed me to see this psychiatrist forever, but I
didn’t want to work with this psychiatrist. It was a fight with the Army the whole time I
was seeing her. She always would have to write up a summary and get permission for so
many visits and then when those visits were over, she had to write another report stating
that I was making progress and could I have some more visits. I mean, it was a continual
struggling and fighting with the Army to pay for seventy-five percent of the cost and I
had to pay for twenty-five percent.

LC: So you were then meshed with your [bureaucratic?] sort of nightmare of…?

PL: Yeah, she was and I was.

LC: Yes, right.

PL: So she was fighting her battle and then I’d come home and get on the phone
and try to fight with them also.

LC: And certainly there are private practitioners who just would say, ‘Look, you
know, I’m not going to do this.’

PL: Well yeah, and there were some that didn’t want to do that.

LC: Yeah.

PL: And from time to time in my therapy with her, I’d have to go get a clinical
evaluation by a clinical psychiatrist. So then I’d have to find somebody that would be
willing to do an evaluation. I’d have to tell them, ‘Well, this is what the Army will pay.
The Army won’t pay your going rate. They’ll pay maybe, you know, a percentage of
your rate. Will you do it for that?’ ‘No I won’t.’ ‘Could you refer me to somebody else
that might?’ So I had to go find all these people to do my periodic evaluations whenever
the Army said it was time for one and they didn’t want to give me any more therapy until
I was evaluated by a clinical psychiatrist.

LC: Did you ever…go head Pauline.
PL: It was just a battle, but you know, by then, I was willing to go to battle with
the Army.

LC: Okay, and where did that change take place, where, ‘You know what, I’m
going to make them pay for this.’ Where did that…?
PL: Because I realized that I was getting extreme value out of working with this
woman, that she was the only person in all these years who was interested and who I felt
safe enough to tell my story to. That I was going through some process with her that was
making a difference in my whole thing about the Vietnam War.

LC: And, just for reference, the process that you’re talking about is not one that
can just be transferred from one, you know, one practitioner or therapist to another.
PL: No.
LC: You can’t…I mean it’s not really…I mean this isn’t even a good analogy,
but it’s not like going to a surgeon.
PL: Right.

LC: Right, where you’re having this piece of matter excised from your abdomen
or something. I mean, this is a completely different kind of dynamic.

PL: It is.

LC: How long…well, did you ever have a point at which even though you were
struggling against the Army thought, ‘This isn’t really worth it.’? I mean, did you have
that kind of ebb and flow in the process?
PL: No, I was pretty much…pretty much knew that it was worth it and there were
times when I knew that I was going deeper with her than I had gone with any other
human being. That I could let her see the depths of the despair in my life and that I had
never really shown that to anybody. So, I knew that if I could endure, you know, the pain
that I went through in her presence, that I would have a different life on the other side of
that. So, it was pretty much, you know, I kept going and then we’d have these periodic
fights and then I saw her for ten years.

LC: Wow.
PL: And at one point, the Army said, ‘Not every week, every other week.’ And I said, ‘Okay. I’m tired of fighting, I’ll go every other week.’ And then I came to my own conclusion after ten years that I was ready to not be in therapy. And you know, I told her that I was ready to stop being in therapy and that I wanted to complete and she requested that I do it slowly and we did it slowly and it was the first time I ever completed a relationship with another human being. At all the previous times when I ended a relationship with people, when I moved and had to say goodbye to people, I never did it emotionally. I just geographically left. And with her, she really required that I say goodbye and that I let her know what she meant to me. And it was a real gift that she gave me and I realize now that all the years I was in therapy with her was just about the whole Vietnam wound, that I could probably have ten more years of therapy about my childhood. But I don’t think I’m going to live long enough to do that. I don’t know if I want to.

(Laughter)

LC: At some point Pauline, you decided to write.

PL: Yup.

LC: Tell me about that decision.

PL: Well, I was...let’s see, about the time that I fell into this severe depression, I got to the point where I weighed almost two hundred pounds. I couldn’t stop eating basically. I had quit drinking alcohol because I thought that alcohol was a problem for me, that I couldn’t really manage my alcoholic intake and having had an alcoholic father, I was pretty vigilant about that. So, I quit drinking early on, I don’t know, when I was maybe...forty I quit drinking, when I was forty. And then the next thing I quit was smoking cigarettes. That was another addiction. I quit maybe shortly after I quit drinking. And then somewhere along the line, I realized that I had been compulsively having one relationship after another with men. I never dated several men at the same time, but I always dated one man for one year and then I ended it. So I had many years worth of one-year relationships, but I never wanted to be in any relationship longer than a year. So, I saw that as another compulsion, so I stopped dating men. And then my body blossomed to about two hundred pounds and I got really scared because I literally
I couldn’t quit eating and I remember thinking, ‘I think I have an eating disorder’ and I went to the Army, I went back to Letterman Hospital, because it was free.

(Laughter)

LC: Right.

PL: And I went to Letterman and I said to this psychiatrist or some doctor there that I saw, I said, ‘You know, I think I have an eating disorder. Can you refer me to somebody I can talk to about an eating disorder.’ And he said, ‘Go up to the third floor. They have a nutrition department up there.’ I went up to the third floor; there was nobody there. There were a few pamphlets about food, about the food pyramid stuff and I remember thinking, ‘This is really disappointing.’ But I didn’t give up.

LC: Right.

PL: I knew I had something funny going on with me and food and I did my own research and I got myself to an over-eater’s anonymous meeting, which is a twelve step recovery meeting for people who are addicted to food, can’t stop eating.

LC: Right, yes.

PL: I mean, there’s people there that weigh a lot more than two hundred pounds.

LC: Sure, absolutely.

PL: So I got involved in the recovery movement and I started working the twelve step program of recovery and I got a sponsor who helped me manage my food intake and I lost all that weight and I got down to the weight that I was when I married my husband. I was so proud of myself.

LC: Wow.

PL: I got down to like one hundred and forty pounds. Boy, that was pretty skinny.

LC: That’s amazing.

PL: Yeah.

LC: How tall are you?

PL: 5’7’.

LC: Okay, that’s pretty good.

(Laughter)
PL: Yeah. And so part of what my sponsor would do with me was every day, I had to answer a question.

LC: Okay.

PL: And so, I would answer these questions and then I wanted to keep writing more and more and more. So I kept writing more and more and more and more and so much of it was intuitive. I got this intuitive feeling to go to a writing workshop. So I went to a writing workshop and the writing teacher was a very intuitive woman and she said, ‘Okay, I want you to make a list of ten things that you’re afraid to write about.’

LC: Wow.

PL: And the first item on my list was Vietnam.

LC: Yeah.

PL: The second thing was my childhood. And I don’t remember the lists of the other things, but she said, ‘Take the top item on your list and go write about it. Go out into my garden and write. I’ll come and get you when your time is up.’ And that day, it was after I had been on the medication for awhile and after I’d been seeing my therapist for awhile, within that same year, I decided to write about the day they came to tell me that Howard died and I had never told that story or written it. Well maybe I had told it to my therapist, but I had never really written it.

LC: Right.

PL: So I wrote it and it was very cathartic and I was crying and writing and crying and writing and when she came to get me, she saw how emotionally upset I was and she said, ‘I’d like for you to share your writing with the group.’ And I said, ‘I don’t think I can do that.’ And she said, ‘Would you please?’ And she really supported me to do that. So I would read a few words and I would cry and then I would read a few more words and cry some more and as I look back now, what I was doing was I was what they call communalizing my grief for the first time.

LC: What does that mean?

PL: That means that I was sharing my grief in a community of people that could accept it; and that I had not done that for all those years. Grief needs a community. It needs to be spoken and seen and heard. And Jonathan Shay wrote a book called *Achilles in Vietnam*. 
LC: Yes.
PL: Are you familiar with that book?
LC: Yes.
PL: In that book, he talks about communalizing our grief and how many of the Vietnam Veterans have not had the opportunity to do that. And I had not had the opportunity to do it and here, I was doing it. So then once I wrote that story, then I wanted to write more stories. So writing became another container that could hold my grief because I could write in the privacy of my own home. I was living in a one bedroom apartment and I had gotten a Macintosh computer and I could take out that box that said Vietnam and open it and with the support of my therapist and my writing and my sponsor, I could enter that deep grief and I could write about it. And so I wrote about it and it became a book.

LC: How did the process of getting it published occur?
PL: You know, it was kind of like wrestling with the Army to get therapy.
(Laughter)
LC: That sounds right, yes, go head.
PL: It’s like, ‘I’ve written this really powerful cathartic story, would you be interested in publishing it.’ ‘No thank you. No thank you, no thank you, no thank you.’
LC: Right. Every writer will recognize this part of the story. I certainly do.
(Laughter)
PL: And it was like, okay, then this is not a book. So I would stick it in the bottom drawer of my desk and say, ‘I’m going to get on with my life.’ You know, ‘I’ve got the healing, it’s not a book.’ And then something would happen, like, here’s an example of something that would happen. This Vietnam Vet called me one day and said, There’s an article in the paper about Vietnam Vets, you have to read it.’ So I went and bought the Sunday paper and read it and it was a story about how Vietnam Vets live in affluence and it was about how these Vietnam Vets were living the affluent life and that they had put Vietnam behind them and that they had gotten on with their life and that they didn’t understand all these homeless Vets that couldn’t put Vietnam behind them. Oh my God, so I was so triggered by that article.
LC: Oh, I’ll bet.
PL: Oh my God, it was like, ‘How dare you say this?’ So I sat down and I wrote
this letter to the editor, which turned into an Op Ed piece, which got published in the
paper, which prompted about thirty phone calls of people telling me, ‘Thank you so much
for this article. You told my story.’ And that just fueled my fire for my book. It’s like;
there are people who want to read my book. I don’t know how I’m going to get it to
them, but there is an audience for my book and I will find a way to get it out there. And
basically, that’s what I did. I found a way to get it out there and even now, people that
are losing people in this current war…

LC: Yes.

PL: It’s not like my book has a lot of publicity, but these widows are very
resourceful. There’s an Internet now.

LC: Yes, right.

PL: And they go on the Internet and they type ‘War Widow’, and because I have
a website, my book pops up and they order a copy of my book. And several of them have
actually…most of them don’t identify themselves, they just want to like order the book,
and I don’t know who they are, but sometimes I say, ‘I’d like to sign the book, do you
have any connection to war?’ And some of them will say, ‘My husband died, blah, blah,
blah.’ And you know, they’re buying my book because they are a war widow also. And
it’s like, ‘Oh my god, another war, the same thing is happening.’

LC: And Pauline, do you have any views on, for example, the current conflict in
Iraq, I mean, and the Unites States making the commitment of troops in that situation?

PL: I do have pretty strong views about it. As a matter of fact, I just saw Michael
Moore’s movie last night.

LC: Did you? This would be Fahrenheit 9/11. What do you think of that movie?

PL: Well, you know, I went with a friend and she saw it the night before and she
said, ‘I want to warn you, there’s some stuff in here about the families of people who
have lost someone.’ And I said, ‘That’s okay, I can handle it.’ And I didn’t…you know,
there was one point where they were interviewing a woman who lost her son in the Iraqi
War and she was talking about her grief and that was okay. But when the movie was
over and everybody got up and filed out, I sat there and I was kind of paralyzed and I
thought, ‘All you people that have just watched this movie, do you have any connection
to war or am I the only one? Am I the only war survivor in this room? What is your
connection to this war and what will you do with this information that you’ve just been
exposed to? Will it make a difference in your life or not? Will it make you think or not?’
I feel very strongly that we’re in this war for economic reasons, not for anything to do
with Iraqi freedom or terrorism. I feel very strongly that Vietnam was the same kind of
war. We were in it for economic reasons. I didn’t know it at the time. Howard didn’t
know it at the time, but in one of his last letters that he wrote home, he said that he was
beginning to find out what the war was really about and he saw that American lives were
being sacrificed and it was making him sick. And a week later, his life was sacrificed.

LC: What was he thinking; just to specify, what was he thinking that it was
about?

PL: You know, he didn’t go into detail.

LC: Okay.

PL: He didn’t tell me, but you know what, I bet he talked it over with his
buddies. But, I remember when I was writing my book and I came across that letter
because I was rereading all the letters.

LC: Yes.

PL: And I came across that letter and it was just like somebody took a knife and
stabbed it into my heart. It’s like, he knew. You know, when he went to Vietnam, I
know that he went there thinking that he was fighting Communism, because I know that
about him. He was a patriot, you know. His father had served in World War II, and he
went there thinking this was his duty, he was going to fight this war, and he was fighting
for freedom from Communism. And, you know, in this last letter, that…oh here, I have
it. ‘This war just turns my stomach. It seems like a big political game and I feel that
American lives are not to be played with.’ So that’s what he said. What he meant, your
interpretation is as good as anybody’s.

LC: But you knew him and you have an intuitive sense though.

PL: Yeah, it’s like he knew that the war was wrong and there he was, you know.

And that was right before he died, that he had that realization.

LC: Right, right.
And I also know that the military trains men to be loyal to each other. So, you know, when all of his medals came back and the citation with his medal said, you know, ‘That Sergeant Querry, disregarding his own safety, crossed the bridge to rescue the beleaguered force on the other side.’ And you know, at some point, when I was writing my book, I got really angry. How could he disregard his own safety? He had a pregnant wife at home. How could he even do that? But then I know that the military trains men to disregard their own safety, you know. They train them that they’re a unit now, they’re not individuals. And that, whatever the unit is up to, whatever the goal of a unit is, is what their life is about.

Pauline, how do you assess the U.S. government’s treatment of widows like yourself and family members like your daughter over all these years? Has the government properly resourced taking care of obligations that had incurred in the Vietnam conflict?

I’m grateful that the Army paid for ten years of therapy. I’m grateful that the Army still pays me a widow’s pension. I’m very grateful for all my medical care that I’ve gotten through the Army. I am very grateful for all of that and much of it has involved a battle, a fight. I regret that my daughter wasn’t emotionally prepared to go to college and the only way that the Army would support her in going to college is if she had to do it and graduate by the time she was twenty-one or twenty-two and I fought with the Army to try to get educational benefits for her extended beyond that and I gave up the fight. Much of it has been a battle. There was no grief support back in ’68 for me. There was no Hospice, there’s Hospice now, but the Army’s not connected with Hospice. I don’t know what kind of grief support the Army has now for people, but I’ve spoken to a few widows who say, you know, they’ve had a couple of visits with their minister, but that’s the extent of it. So, the grief support was not there. I’m grateful that I found a way to get healed myself and like I said, the medical care has been so important because I feel like I’ve been this wounded bird my whole life and like my right wing got clipped and it was my husband’s death in the Vietnam War. And, so I haven’t been a fully functioning adult as a result of that. And even though I’ve had all this therapy, I still have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and I will always have that. And because I have
that, I don’t watch a lot of the news and I don’t get really emotionally involved in this war, because when I do, I get back into that foggy place of non-reality and I can’t function and I really need to function.

LC: And so the triggers are still around for you?

PL: They’re still there. I mean, when former President Reagan’s funeral was on T.V….

LC: Yes.

PL: The flag draped coffin, I mean, all these years later, I see a coffin with a flag on it and I get into that foggy place of non-reality and I have a flashback about my husband’s coffin with the flag on it.

LC: And when those kinds of things come into your path, what do you do to correct?

PL: I go for a walk, I call a friend, I sit in mediation, I tell myself I can’t read whatever it is I’m reading or I can’t watch whatever it is I’m watching. I’m signed up with a whole bunch of email lists and people forward me things. A lot of times, I just delete them. I can’t read about the pain of this war because I have a lot greater capacity to be with grief and pain than most people do, but I see…unless it’s someone I’m working with in my coaching business, I can’t afford the luxury of entertaining the grief basically because it takes me away from the reality of my life. And I need to be in my life and live in my present day life right now and take care of myself.

LC: Right.

PL: Because I feel capable of doing that for the first time, you know, in many, many years, that I feel like a lot of potential is in my life right now and if I let myself be drug down this road of, you know, getting involved in this war, that I will lose my ability to continue to strengthen my business and build up my own economic stability.

LC: Is the coaching business that you developed a big part of the life that you have now and that you see opening before you?

PL: It is.

LC: Can you tell me a little bit about this and how you have it organized?

PL: Well, how I have it organized is that I speak…I have to find my own clients, so I talk to a lot of people about coaching, do they know what it is and I offer them a
sample session. And usually if people will agree to the sample session, and I do this over
the telephone, I spend thirty minutes with them on the phone, and I’ve been trained to do
these practice sessions, so I know how to do them and I know what’s important. And
usually if people touch something really profound in their life and they have the
resources, they will sign up. It’s just a matter of having them step into the space of
coaching. And because I feel really intuitive, I’m pretty good at intuitively picking up on
what it is a person might want to investigate in their life.
    LC: Okay.
    PL: And so whenever I can drop into that intuitive place with people, I’m pretty
good at getting it on the phone. So I have like seven clients now. I just finished my
training in March and I’m going through the certification process and at the end of
October, I will finish the certification, take a test, and then I will be certified by the
school that I went to, and then I will go for the certification for the International
Coaching Federation, which is an organization that certifies coaches also.
    LC: Now, this is life coaching basically?
    PL: Life coaching.
    LC: If you had to explain that to someone who was not familiar with it at all,
what would you saw?
    PL: Well, I would say that life coaching is about setting up a designed alliance
with someone who is completely committed and focused on you as a person. It is not
counseling; it is not therapy. You life coach is like…the analogy that I have on my
website is that when you learned how to ride a bicycle, if you had someone that held you
up while you were learning to ride your bike, and ran along side you while you were
learning and finally let go of the bike and you took off on your own, that’s kind of like a
simple analogy what a life coach is. It’s so much more than a cheerleader, but a life
coach is trained to direct people to look within to their own inner resources and their own
inner-knowing to decide if they’re stuck, how to get unstuck in their life. If they are not
living a life that’s in balance where they have all aspects of their life are harmonious, that
a life coach will work with you to bring harmony into your life. And a life coach will
also help you live a life based on your values rather than live a life based on what society
or somebody else tells you is important to you. So, if they will work with you to access
your values and your dreams and your unfulfilled projects and like that. So, it’s a very
intimate relationship that I have with my clients and it’s just so profound, the stuff that
happens.

LC: Yeah.

PL: And I’m kind of in awe. It’s like, ‘My God, this is really powerful stuff.’

LC: And, if you can Pauline, say something about how your own process of
dealing with grief and coming through the enormous emotional storms and difficulties
that you’ve had plays a role in doing this kind of advising and coaching for someone else.

PL: Well, you know, what my teachers have told me in my process of getting
myself trained is that your clients will only go to the places where you have been. And I
really believe that there’s a lot of people in this country who have not done grief work
and who don’t find people who are comfortable that they can do their grief work with.
And I believe, because I have touched such deep despair in my own life, around my own
grief, around those and my husband, that I have a capacity that most people…and an
advantage over other coaches because I can do what they call in the trade, ‘Go down the
tubes with people.’ I can go to the depths of despair and kind of hold the line for them
while they go down there and be the safety anchor like my therapist was for me.

LC: Right.

PL: To say, ‘It’s okay, you’re going to survive this deep grief, this deep feeling.’
As a matter of fact, the more you allow it, the more it will be lessened. It’s like a
pressure cooker. Grief is like a pressure cooker and when you allow yourself an episode
of deep emotional release, you let some of the steam off that the unresolved grief is in
your life. And I believe too because I’ve been in the personal growth industry since I was
twenty-seven years old because I kept trying to figure out and sort out my life. I’ve been
in this industry and my life coaching is an aspect of a human potential movement.

LC: Yes.

PL: And I’ve been in that since I was twenty-seven, so I’m, you know, fifty-nine
in October, so I have all those years of experience. My own personal growth experience
as well as working with other people in their process. So, the grief is just part of what I
feel like I have to offer people is that I’ve touched my own depths of despair and I have
survived and I’m now beginning to thrive. And all those years when I wanted to thrive
and I never could, I think it was because I was unwilling to touch the most painful
experience in my life to really experience the emotions involved in that and to go through
them and get to the other side of it.

LC: And would you say that it’s sometimes the case that when you have this like
huge, as you’ve said, elephant in the room or albatross, you’ve used a number of different
descriptions for these kind of huge problems that are unnamed and unrecognized and
therefore undealt with, did that impact other areas of your life?

PL: Oh absolutely.

LC: Yeah.

PL: Absolutely. I mean, health problems…

LC: Yeah.

PL: Absolutely. You know, I could go on and on about, for instance, Howard’s
parents, his father in particular. The health issues that he has had in his life and I
intuitively know that it’s all related to his unresolved grief. Whatever you can’t be with,
it will get you one way or the other and how it got me, you know, I couldn’t be with my
grief and how it got me was a clinical depression [that made me] suicidal.

LC: Yeah.

PL: Whatever you can’t be with, it’ll get you one way or the other. [See
Mezwal?] gets support and be with it and get beyond it and go through it, because that’s
kind of my analogy. I was brought to my knees with my grief, you know, through the
clinical depression and I was brought to my knees with my addictions through my eating
disorder and that’s another thing. Because I have an eating disorder, because I know the
pool of the addiction process, I feel like I have a capacity to be with others in their
addictive process. So I have my grief training and my own grief process, I have my
twelve-step recovery, and I have my own addictions, so it’s like I’ve become the
wounded healer so to speak in many aspects of my life.

LC: Yes, yes, absolutely.

PL: And people see me and they say, ‘God, you look great, what did you do?
Did you get your haircut?’ And I say, ‘I’ve been transforming myself inside and out for
about ten years now. I’m glad it’s finally obvious.’

(Laughter)
LC: Moment of victory.
PL: Yes. People are beginning to see it.
LC: There you go, exactly.
PL: All that hard work and all those times alone in my little apartment writing my grief and experiencing my grief.
LC: Pauline, is there anything that I haven’t asked you about that you’d like to include in this interview?
PL: Yeah, there’s a whole piece Laura that I’m just recently discovering, which I’d love to write another book about, but I don’t know if I have the energy or the resources to do that. And it’s the whole thing that happens with widows and children. Specifically if there’s an only child and a widow in the family, the dynamic that’s created between those two is quite intense to say the least.
LC: Well, and a couple of pieces about your discussions with your daughter and her discussions with you frankly in 1990, and you know, reveal something of that, things that you’ve included in the interview.
PL: Yeah, and that, you know, my daughter became the reason that I actually stayed alive, but at some point, really, at some point probably very early on, that was so unhealthy for her. A child is not supposed to carry a parent emotionally and it happens all the time and it happens really all the time if there’s a war widow who’s pregnant and that husband dies. A child carries the emotional load of the mother.
LC: Yes, I have seen that happen.
PL: Yeah.
LC: Yeah.
PL: And that’s the next area of growth for me that I will not do that to my daughter anymore. That I will not lay my emotional needs in her lap and I see the result in her life of me not doing that anymore. She’s like a bird out of a cage.
LC: She’s not taking care of you now?
PL: Nope.
LC: And she’s able to move up and do her own thing, and of course, as you mentioned, she has her own children now.
PL: Yeah.
LC: And how many kids does she have?
PL: She has two little girls.
LC: And how old are they?
PL: Alexis is seven and Sadie is three.
LC: And do they live near grandma?
PL: They live about a half and an hour away and once a month, they come for the weekend and they were just here this weekend.
LC: Okay, and does that keep you pretty busy then for the weekend?
PL: Oh, it’s like my whole life just pauses, I push the pause button on my life and I sit down and I be with these kids and I told my daughter yesterday when I took the kids back, I said, ‘You know, if Sadie was my little girl and I had it to do all over again, I would just sit here and watch her grow because I can’t tell you how fast these years will go.’ You know, they will grow so fast. And I said, ‘If I could do motherhood over again, I would just sit here and watch her grow.’ And my daughter looked at me and my son-in-law looked at me and it was like I don’t know what they were thinking, but my daughter said, ‘Yeah, she is pretty sweet isn’t she.’ She was sitting there sleeping in her little car seat that I carried in because she fell asleep. And I was just looking at her and thinking about how precious she is and how quickly my daughter’s childhood slipped through my fingers because I couldn’t be with my daughter in the way that I can now be with my grandchildren.
LC: Yes.
PL: Because what was between me and my daughter was my grief. And as one of my people [clients] said the other day about grief, she said, ‘It’s a glass bubble in which I live and I keep bumping into it.’ I thought that was a great metaphor.
LC: Yes it is.
PL: The glass bubble in which I walk around in.
LC: Yeah, and you bumped into it and other people do as well.
PL: Yeah, and the minute, you know, it’s like, ‘Well, where’s your husband in this scenario. There’s a mother and there’s a baby and like, where’s the husband?’ ‘He died in a war.’ ‘Oh!’ ‘Boom!’ There you are, there’s the glass door that everybody bumps into.
LC: And as you said, people don’t…Americans, polite society; don’t really know what to do. What’s the next sentence…they really don’t…?

PL: They don’t know what to do with grief period and grief in a war is even worse.

LC: Right.

PL: So as a widow, you just wanted to keep your mouth shut and carry your burden and in doing that, you can’t communalize your grief and it’s so personally devastating.

LC: Well, it’s to me, a remarkable story the way that you have come through yours and I’m very grateful to you for sharing it with us.

PL: Thank you for the opportunity. It’s always a wonderful thing to tell it.

LC: Thank you very much Pauline.