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An Interview with Joan Carol Lieberman, author of *Optimal Distance*.

Your two-part autobiography, *Optimal Distance, A Divided Life*, will be published by Camperdown Elm Publishing on September 1, 2017. What is the difference between an autobiography and a memoir? And why is *Optimal Distance* in two parts?

Readers sometimes are confused about the differences between a memoir and an autobiography. A memoir is a slice of someone's life, while an autobiography covers the author's whole life. Writing an autobiography is not for the faint of heart. Mine will be one of the few published this year. Had I not been a devout diarist, I couldn't have done it. The twin challenges of both remembering the details of one's life and writing about one's experiences only increase with age. There were many times when I did not expect to finish. Mortality creates a rigorous deadline.

Optimal Distance is in two parts based on my mother developing paranoid schizophrenia when I was born. In her hallucinatory states, she tried to kill me more than once. Her death was the greatest gift she ever gave me because her existence divided my life. I never experienced authentic intimacy or anything close to *optimal* distance with my mother because of her mental illness. Instead, whenever I was near her, I had to be on high alert to avoid triggering the invisible trap door within her brain. After her death, I eventually freed myself of that burden.

Part One of *Optimal Distance* begins with my parents' courtship in 1940 and ends with my mother's death on the morning of my fortieth birthday in 1982. *Part Two* of *Optimal Distance* begins just after my mother's death and ends on my seventy-fifth birthday in June 2017. Fifteen months after my mother's death, I had a second child, twenty years after my first. My son was five when I was diagnosed with metastatic cancer. I turned back to the past in search of meaning and understanding and I began to examine more closely what I eventually came to call "the long worm of my life." I was forced to find *optimal distance* from death and fear.

Optimal Distance is an unusual title; what does it mean?

For me *optimal distance* refers to those moments when I feel safe psychologically and physically. I first thought about *optimal distance* on Mother's Day 1981, when I was reading a book by D.W. Winnicott, the famous British pediatrician and psychoanalyst. He saw the "holding environment" created by new mothers as critical to a child's development. As a child takes his or her first steps away from the mother (or primary caregiver), Winnicott concluded that the mother must be there if the child needs help. In my own case, my mother was either so dangerously close or so psychologically distant that she was incapable of providing either a holding environment or help when I needed it. My epiphany in 1981 was that I had spent my whole life searching for *optimal distance* from her. I subsequently realized that the same phenomena was operating in all of my relationships and was central to my fear of death and God.



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We are all constantly in search of the right amount of separation in our relationships. Many other aspects of our lives also involve distance, for example, distance is at the core of the work-life balance problems we all face. Marriages fail or succeed based on whether one partner develops a need for more intimacy or less, thus disturbing the normative distance between partners. Sometimes an individual can feel so close to God or become so devoted to other rituals that these preoccupations interfere with their human relationships. I know many parents who feel that there needs to be much more distance between their teenagers and their iPhones.

Can you tell us how it was that you came to write your autobiography and why it took eighteen years?

I had no plan to write my autobiography. I have had an unusual life, but I am not famous. Nor do I have a platform on social media. Instead, a series of serendipitous events led me down the autobiographical path. As one of three finalists for the Bakeless Literary Prize, I was invited to attend the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference as a Bakeless Scholar. Like all Bread Loaf participants, I was required to submit a writing sample for review and criticism. I started writing about my childhood, surprising myself when I found it hard to stop. At Bread Loaf, my publishing consult was with Carol Houck Smith, Editor-at-Large at W.W. Norton. I never would have undertaken an autobiography without her encouragement. Carol Houck Smith was a woman of remarkable energy and spirit. Although officially retired, she was still going to her office at W.W. Norton. We developed a close relationship because our communication styles were similar. Another common thread was that she was then editing the American Poet Laureate, Stanley Kunitz, who had roomed with my paternal uncle at Harvard.

Instead of my personal experiences, the first manuscript I gave Carol Houck Smith after Bread Loaf was mostly a social science treatise on *optimal distance*. She made it clear that "safe social science" was not what W.W. Norton had in mind. For the next seven years Carol Houck Smith used humor and tolerance to encourage me to write about my own life experiences with *optimal distance*. I was quite reluctant, almost phobic, about making my experiences public. My diary entries, particularly those written when I was a child or teenager, lacked any historical context, and some posed puzzling mysteries. So I undertook a detailed excavation of my own history and its context. Whenever my ambivalence created a writer's blockade, I retreated to the safety of research.

In 2007, while I was flying to Utah to give a speech about Jewish genealogy, I had a near fatal stroke and my recovery was slow. Sadly, Carol had died by the time I had recovered enough to resume writing. After her death, I stopped writing and drifted into genealogical work, researching the origins of my family, as well as those of my husband and several friends.



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In 2014, my husband, Bob Pelcyger, and I made a bucket list for our marriage what he wanted from me and what I wanted from him before our deaths. He wanted me to finish *Optimal Distance, A Divided Life*, which I finally did on my 75th birthday in June 2017.

Would you mind explaining what you were you phobic about?

Like many others, I inherited numerous family secrets. I learned from an early age to hide the fact that my mother was both dangerous and deeply disturbed. Schizophrenia is still a shameful secret. I had to overcome that shame and work very hard to understand all of its effects to be able to complete my autobiography.

How would you describe yourself?

As an only child who grew up as an outsider, I am a Western woman at heart, having spent most of my life in close proximity to the Rocky Mountains. I was born in Salt Lake City during World War II and I have lived in Boulder, Colorado for the last fifty years. My mother's ancestors were among the first Mormon pioneers to reach the Valley of the Great Salt Lake with Brigham Young in 1848. My father was born in Newark, New Jersey, but spent much of his childhood in Ogden, Utah. He was distantly related to Simon Bamberger, the only Jewish governor of Utah. He became a research entomologist for the federal government. We moved throughout the West in response to various insect plagues.

The fact that my parents met, let alone married, was an unlikely statistical accident. As their only surviving child, I was born a full-blooded Gentile. To survive my mother's paranoid schizophrenia, I had to keep a safe distance away from her. While I lived in Utah, I found what felt like safety when I followed a neighbor to the Mormon Ward House. Nonetheless, growing up in Delta and Logan, Utah, I always felt like a small wild animal desperately trying to hide from danger among a large herd of domineering dairy cows.

What do you mean when you say you were born a full-blooded Gentile?

Mormons refer to anyone who is not a Mormon as a Gentile. Jews sometimes do the same for non-Jews, and Catholics for non-Christians. It is a term for "other" that has fallen out of favor, but in Utah it is still part of the collective vocabulary. The equivalent term used by Islamists is infidel.

When did you leave you Utah?

I was fourteen when my father was transferred to Bozeman, Montana, allowing me to leave my pseudo-protective-membership in the Mormon Church behind. A year later my father was sent to Bakersfield, California, where I graduated from high school, after which I enrolled at the University of California. After a year of pre-med studies, I traveled in Europe and worked as a medical volunteer in Africa. While I was away, my father was transferred to Tucson, Arizona. When I returned to Berkeley, I gave birth to a daughter and pushed her stroller through demonstrations for



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Free Speech and against the War in Vietnam. I lived through the cultural chaos of the mid-1960's in Berkeley.

In 1966 a rent-free house drew me into the woods of Northern Idaho. I thought it would provide a peaceful place for my daughter and give me time to finish my thesis. That move taught me that there is no such thing in life as free rent.

Two years later, I joined the War on Poverty and moved to Boulder, Colorado to direct the Boulder County Head Start program. That work eventually led to an assignment from the Ford Foundation to help develop the Native American Rights Fund (NARF). I met and fell in love with Bob Pelcyger at NARF. After our marriage in 1975, I became a management consultant, working with lawyers, doctors, and women in leadership positions. I gave birth to our son in 1983 and became involved in his education, while continuing my consulting practice. I am still working with several long-term clients.

What do you hope readers will gain from reading *Optimal Distance, A Divided Life*?

My hope is that *Part One* will help readers understand what it means to live with someone suffering from schizophrenia. Schizophrenia strikes one out of every one hundred people. For me that statistic makes it a human disaster.

My mother developed paranoid schizophrenia during the long era (1934-1984) when most experts believed that schizophrenia was caused by “perverse mothering.” Sadly, my mother was dead by the time schizophrenia was classified as a biological mental illness. I spent most of my young adulthood terrified that I would develop schizophrenia because I knew for certain I had grown up with a “perverse mother.” Even after schizophrenia was determined to be a biological mental illness, regardless of the type of parenting one receives, I was still on guard because there is a sometimes a genetic component.

I was fifty-seven before I finally discovered what I believe to be the source of my mother's schizophrenia. I learned that my maternal grandmother became ill with the Spanish Influenza in January 1919 when she was five months pregnant with my mother. Current research into the Zika virus is showing how viruses cross the placenta barrier and how much damage they can do to a developing fetus. I have come to believe that the virus that caused Spanish Influenza was the source of the original glitch in my mother's brain.

I also hope that readers will see more clearly how each of us are perpetually engaged in a dance of distance with everyone with whom we interact, not just in our pair relationships. We also are often searching for *optimal distance* from death and our spiritual beliefs or lack thereof.

In my household, the phrase *optimal distance* is applied descriptively. For example, “It sound like the marriage of our friends is ending because they never achieved *optimal distance*.” Or it might be



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used to convey dissatisfaction, e.g. “The accumulation of dog feces in the backyard next door is less-than-*optimal distance*”.

***Part Two* covers the second half of your life. What are its main themes?**

Part Two of *Optimal Distance* is about motherhood at mid-life and the excavation of what I call “the long worm of my life.” Shortly after my terminal diagnosis, I became close friends with other mothers with young children who were also suffering from metastatic breast cancer. The intimacy of my relationships with two of those mothers became an essential part of my life and, I believe, of my survival; their stories are included in *Part Two*.

When we face a terminal illness like cancer, the proximity of death changes the psychological distance in all of our relationships—not only with our spouses and children, friends and work colleagues, but also with our own spirituality or lack thereof. Most of us have moments when awareness of our inevitable mortality emerges from the background and death becomes omnipresent. For example, when a friend our age dies suddenly, or when a parent comes to the end of his or her life. Just as each of us must struggle to find a comforting distance from death, we also go through the same process with our philosophical and religious beliefs.

According to your bio, you have lived with metastatic breast cancer for twenty-eight years. How is that even possible? Are you certain you received the correct diagnosis?

Yes, as I explain in *Part Two*, I have survived far longer than the original prognosis and much longer than anyone, including me, ever expected. But increasing numbers of patients with metastatic cancer are experiencing lengthy periods of survival in part due to advances in treatment. Some, like myself, have been through a long series of treatments and have been able to turn cancer into something resembling a chronic condition. Several years ago, I lost an “email” friend who had survived with metastatic cancer for thirty-three years. As far as I know, she was and still is the record holder. That said, I am definitely a statistical fluke.

My records, scans, and tumor samples were sent to the National Cancer Institute (NCI) at the National Institute of Health in Washington, D.C. because a physician who was treating me with an alternative therapy was trying to obtain funding from NCI for a clinical trial. At that time, I had a very hard time believing that I had experienced a temporary radical remission of my cancer. Instead I thought the radiologist must have mixed up my scans with those of another patient. However, my original diagnosis and subsequent remission were confirmed by NCI.

What has happened to your spiritual beliefs as a result of your experiences?

I have been surprised by how hard it has been for me to delete some of the Mormon concepts uploaded to my brain when I was a young child in Utah. When I was twenty-three and a student at UC Berkeley, I sought and was granted excommunication from the Mormon Church on the



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grounds of apostasy. Mostly what remains is a kind low-grade fear, an emotional hangover from my excommunication trial. The three bishops conducting my trial assured me that, because I had been given the opportunity to accept the gospel of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, but had lost my faith, I was going to burn in Hell for eternity.

As a teenager and during the first half of my adulthood, I found it much easier to identify with my father's atheism than with my mother's paranoid beliefs that the devil was lurking nearby. However, after I became ill and began searching for any meaning in my life, I slowly began to see that I was more agnostic than atheistic. That shift was due in part to an experience I had while I was hiking alone in Yellowstone. It was there that I caught a glimpse of a powerful metaphysical force. Yellowstone became my cathedral of worship. It remains a sacred spot for me.

As I excavated the shards of my life, a question from my first-born granddaughter led me to the new science of epigenetics. I became a convert because epigenetics offered a scientific explanation for the synchronicity I have often experienced. Because it is based on empirical science, I felt an immediate level of comfort with it.

What do you mean by epigenetics?

The scientific definition is the study of changes in organisms caused by modification of gene expression, rather than alteration of the genetic code itself. Basically, scientists are discovering that our health and behaviors are partially influenced, not only before our birth, but even before our parents were born. Our bodies have been directly influenced by the experiences of our parents, grandparents, and great grandparents—the food they ate or didn't eat, the loving, the luxuries, or the stresses and traumas they experienced. Those experiences are recorded in chemical attachments that act on our DNA molecules, regulating when, where, and how proteins are made.

These chemical additives are markers that change as we adapt to our environment, whether in the womb or after birth. They make some of us more immune to stress or disease and others of us, for example, more susceptible to diabetes or biological mental illness. These markers profoundly affect our own behavior and those of our progeny. Fascinated, by these possibilities, I delved into epigenetics. I believe this new science will become increasingly important in the future.

In one epigenetic experiment, adolescent mice were subjected to an electric shock at the same time they were exposed to the scent of cherry blossoms. Their offspring also displayed distress when exposed to the scent of cherry blossoms, even though they had not been conceived at the time their parents were subjected to the shocks.

Are there other discoveries you made in researching and writing about your life?

There are many, but here are a few that were important to me.



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* I discovered that not knowing more about the personal history of my parents and their ancestors was equivalent to my not having learned how to read.

* I now believe that everyone inherits family secrets and everyone leaves a legacy that is partially secret.

* I don't believe in magic except for what can be found in prescient dreams, coincidences, and extremely rare interventions of metaphysical forces.

* I will die humbled by the power of the unconscious.

* My cross-species relationships with animals have infused me with a source of hope for our conflicted world.

Since you are seventy-five, persuade someone to read *Optimal Distance* in seventy-five words or less.

Optimal Distance shows how distance shapes our relationships with others, with death, and with our spiritual beliefs. It also illustrates that people with fundamental differences are nonetheless capable of coherence. Readers may begin to wonder which ancestral experiences have been recorded in their cells, while paying greater attention to the wisdom of their dreams. They may even decide they need a bucket list.

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