Freya Manfred: Why do I do what I'm doing? It's a good question because, for me, particularly at my age, 70 – I'll be 70 very soon - and I have been thinking when I wake up in the middle of the night more and more: what else could I have done? Maybe I should have done something else. I wish I had done something else, at times. But I don't ever wish I had completely done something else, luckily. So, I'll try to explain how I came to write poetry - and be a mother and be a caretaker and be some of the other things I am. It would have to do in my case with family. I grew up in house full of books - stacks of books everywhere, shelves of books everywhere, people reading books of all kinds, of all sorts, in all areas. My dad is a Minnesota writer too, Frederick Manfred, and he wrote 24 novels in his lifetime. He just gave me books for every birthday, every Christmas. I know my sister and brother got a little tired of that, “always getting books” the used to say. My sister was a wonderful musician - is a wonderful musician - and my brother was wonderful in many other ways. He was interested in theater and politics and so on - and still is. So I'm sure that it was my mother reading all the time and having professors over at the house all the time – not that my parents were professorial; neither of them really taught full-time. So there I was, surrounded by books, loving to read. I think also – we lived near the outdoors all the time. We lived near the Minnesota River in a sprawling a country house that wasn't even insulated for quite some time, so we had a roaring fireplace in one of the rooms. I was outside from the time I was very tiny in all weathers, so my two things I love are to be outside and in connection with the outdoors as much as I can, and also to read and eventually, I think the grass from where I lived and the trees where I lived and the animals where I lived – they become a part of you. It's like that poem by Walt Whitman *There Was a Child Went Forth*. In that poem, he talks about how a child goes forth every day, and everything he sees becomes part of him - or her. So somehow these things became part of me from the outdoors very much, and at some point, I wanted to talk about what I felt there and saw there, and what I felt and saw inside myself. Somehow, loneliness fits all into this too. In a strange way, I've always been lonely, in an odd way. It's very hard for me explain this. It's as if I want to talk, and I have this desire that some space around me is going to hear or listen, and I want that. But I think it came partly from long times alone. I was not an only child; my sister came five years later, my brother nine years later, but we lived way in the country. I didn't have a lot of friends for a while. I was very shy. So, I don’t know, poetry somehow for me is an interweaving of being a lone person, being outdoors, being surrounded by books full of words and to the point where words are so important to me that even the letters of words are important, even an ‘a’ is important to me and an ‘l’ and an ‘m’ and a ‘p.’ They are sort of magical; ‘o’ is one of the most magical letters. So, in some sort of way, these things wove together, braided together, became who I was, if that makes any sense at all. And I got a lot of a joy from *doing it*, from writing the words on pages. I did a lot of painting, too, but mostly writing mattered to me. After a while, other people started to tell me that what I was doing was valuable to them, that it moved them, or that they cared about it, or that they're going to show it to their aunt, or that they would show it to their wife who had a miscarriage, or that they would show it to someone. Particularly, I remember the enthusiastic support of James Wright who was a professor – James A. Wright was a professor at the University Minnesota and at Macalester College in St. Paul.
He was a brilliant professor, who taught Shakespeare to me and the rest of our class, and also 20 century lit. He was a great - in my opinion - great poet and and he liked what I was writing. That was an exciting thing to happen, to have another human being – and if anybody understood loneliness, it would be James A. Wright. He wrote me a wonderful letter one time when I was living in Boston, and he’s written a couple other letters before he died. He was only 52, and here I am 70, almost 70, so I’m very lucky. Does that make any sense? That’s how I started out. And that’s what I’m still doing.

Peter Shea: How did you come to understand what a poem is?

Freya Manfred: Well, I think, reading - I read any poet I could get my hands on. I remember particularly Edna St Vincent Millay; some Emily Dickinson, because, when I was younger, I sometimes couldn't penetrate her poetry; Walt Whitman and James Wright. How did I come to understand what it is: the same way I was just trying to describe how I came to be a poet, really. I think if you just read a lot of other writers, you start to think, “I can do that, too.” It might be a little bit like building chimneys. From what I understand from masons who told me that they work with other masons, and it takes a long time to understand how to put the rocks together right for the wonderful old chimneys that you see around – I am not talking about some of the modern chimneys. You learn from watching and observing and trying to do it. I do, when I teach, run into a lot of people who say, “Well, don’t poems have to rhyme.” I never really worried about poems rhyming too much, I guess because I read so many poets who did rhyme, and so many who did not, and they all seemed valuable. They all seemed musical. They all had cadence and power and you could even say glory. They all could do it. I guess that’s the best.

Peter Shea: Your father was a great storyteller. I wonder if you thought of yourself as doing something importantly different than he did.

Freya Manfred: No, no, no, no - I didn't really worry about that. I would have been just as happy to do what he was doing. I loved writing stories all the time and I still love writing fiction more than I love writing poetry. I have five unpublished novels, and I have two memoirs - actually one is published, about my dad: Frederick Manfred: A Daughter Remembers. Another memoir will be out this fall, about my sons; it’s called Raising Twins: A True Life Adventure. But I have not been able to get my novels published. It’s too bad, because, of the five, I'm sure a couple are really good. I like storytelling almost better. Why do I like it better? It's so long and involving and faithful. There’s something so faithful about being a storyteller. You care about the beginning and so many things happen and then there’s an end. It’s a whole life often in a novel or even a short story, a long piece of a life. Poems are great; they’re closer to music, but I actually almost prefer writing something where another person comes to life on the page that I would get to know or that I'm trying to get to know. It is almost like being married to someone and trying to get to know a person. I've been married a very long time, and I still don’t know my husband. He is still completely surprising to me. Whereas a poem -- I shouldn’t start juxtaposing the two. Comparisons aren’t a wise idea, I think. I love both. I don't think I avoided storytelling because of dad. I really never felt competitive. I never felt
competitive with my father about his writing. I wouldn't want to have written what he wrote, even though I love many of the things he wrote. I would rather write what I wrote. He had his own wonderful place to go to, his own wonderful brain. I feel that our sons, for example, one of my sons writes wonderful poetry and the other writes very good fiction, but they are not doing that; they’re painting and drawing - the visual artist. I hope that is a response that made some sense there.

Peter Shea: We spoke earlier about being seventy. I'm 62, kind of curious what happens in the next 10 years. Can you say anything about what it's like to be 70 - what it’s like to be you at 70 – leave aside what anybody else is like?

Freya Manfred: Well, I’m very curious about what it is like for other people too. I really am. I need to know more about it. I’m trying to read more about it. I don't want to read any how-to books. That would be horrifying. For me, the things I noticed, mostly in the last two years since I was 68: I was thinking the other day, dad told me once that when you got to be 68, which is when he started to have knee problems and had to have a knee replaced, and then about ten years later, he had to do the other knee, was about to do the other knee right before he died. He said to me once, right around 68, 69, “I don't like to go into bookstores and give talks anymore about my work. I don't like to go to the Minnesota Historical Society, as much as I love those people, and talk about the history of the Native American people that I wrote about or anything. I want them to ask me questions” – kind of like what you're doing now – “and then I’ll just suddenly respond to those, because then I can go wherever the people's minds and audience are taking me. It’s just boring to read my own book – at my age.” I don't have time for it anymore.”

Anyway, so that's making me think about how, for me, one of the things I've noticed is that I don't want to talk about things where the other person who's speaking goes on a lecture tour. The suddenly start giving a lecture about everything they know about French literature, or they give a lecture about 55 ways that the geological formations of something... My husband and I joke about it; we call it "pontificating," and it's really not pontificating. It’s fine that they know all these things, but they start talking, and I just sort of fall off the train. I'm not there. I don't want to go there. I’d rather know things like how that person is feeling today, how it was like for them to raise a child, what it was like when they got sick, what did they think about their dad and mom. I’d like to know more personal things, more intimate things and not hear a lecture. So I get impatient now at my age quite quickly. But I have not figured out how to be impolitely away from this. I haven’t figured how to disengage yet on some of these conversations.

Another thing I’ve noticed, I find kind of shocking. Different parts of your body don't work as well as they used to. Every morning, I wake up, and a different part of me is sprained: my wrist, my knee, my ankle – and I’m very lucky to be as good as I am.

The other thing I’ve noticed recently is that I can't decide anything. Someone will say “Do you want chocolate cake or white cake, and do you want ice cream or not?” “What day should we meet?” I would always, when I was younger, have been able to say, “I want chocolate cake, I’d like to meet at five, and let’s meet on Friday.” But now, the possibilities of all of them occur to me. Maybe white cake would be really kind of
interesting and maybe it should be Saturday; maybe Saturday’s better for five reasons. I’m trying to use that as an example anyway. It’s almost like being little. As a little kid sometimes, I think people would offer me some choices, and I didn't know which to take, because I really wanted to do to try all of them a little bit. I wanted to try three of them. I think my brain is changing.

And the other thing – this may sound odd also; it’s in a poem that I was working on recently. It feels like the molecules of my body are moving apart from each other, so that they’re going out into space the way the universe is expanding, supposedly, since the big bang, and it feels like that’s happening to my body in a very odd way. It’s fine though. It’s probably just what happens. Does that help anything?

Peter Shea: I can't resist quoting Gertrude Stein on Ezra Pound: “He was a village preacher, which was fine if you were a village, and if not, not.” But, to brain changes: the most optimistic thing I have heard about aging was from a guest a while back who said he used to have a very fine memory and was able to go to the store without a list. He found once to his alarm that he needed a list or he’d forget the eggs, and this worried him, so he went to someone and asked, and the person said, “Well yes, there are things you will lose, and then a little later you will notice things you gain. Your brain rearranges at this point.” And he soon discovered his treat was getting Milton back, vast tracts of Milton verbatim.

Freya Manfred: Wow, that’s wonderful.

Peter Shea: Have you had any treats like that? Please tell me. I am eager to know what I have to look forward to.

Freya Manfred: Well, because I am leaving sooner at 70 – it feels like I am going to die sooner than it did when I was 50 or 30 – our times with our sons Rowan and Bly are extravagant picnics – great joy, great beauty, great happiness when I know they’re coming over, which is occasionally, my whole self is just so pulled together, happy and focused and delighted and in love. And my relationship with my husband, Tom Pope, is similarly shockingly joyous, shockingly special (I hate the word “special”). “I can’t believe – oh, I’m just so lucky. I’m with Tom, right now.” Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and I think, “Tom is around, Tom is around.” It just makes me so happy to be close to the people that I know, that I love – happier than it used to. I think I used to think, “Will they never shut up, will they never leave, and they’re too noisy. And would they get out soon.” Now I just love to be with them, even if there’s problems or anything. I think that’s a big help.

Oh, I know another thing. For some reason, I find myself, no matter what I am doing, whether I’m answering the door to meet you or whether I’m going to the village to see some people down there, I find myself humming songs, they’re songs from the past, from when I was five, ten, 20, 30, the 50s songs, the 60s songs, even some 40s songs, when I was first born. The song just comes. The music comes right into my brain, and I’m humming a song, and I think, “I know it exactly why I am humming it, because it’s
appropriate to this building I’m going to, it’s appropriate to this car I am now in, it’s appropriate to so-and-so who’s coming over.” It’s amazing, and I never had that before. Do you have that yourself?

**Peter Shea:** For me it’s a long-term thing and I am sometimes quite puzzled. For some reason, “I’m just a girl who can’t say no” is probably the most frequent refrain in my mind. I’ve never quite figured out why it takes up so much space. Who knows? I might be borrowing from some of my friends. That one started early for me, from probably 20s or 30s on. A greater role for intuition?

**Freya Manfred:** Yes.

**Peter Shea:** A greater trust in intuition?

**Freya Manfred:** Yes. I had a lot when I was young like that, and now it’s coming back.

**Peter Shea:** Is that kind of a recurring thing, that some experiences from your early youth are re-emerging now?

**Freya Manfred:** I think so. I think that’s definitely the case, both in helpful ways and in not-helpful ways.

**Peter Shea:** My mother is 92. There is this next 20 years, from where you are, to think about. Have you had occasion to associate with people in their 90s?

**Freya Manfred:** Yes, my mother died at 90. That was in 2010, and then my husband’s father Henry died at 92, in 2009. They died a year apart. We saw lot of both of them. My dad always said he would live to be 90, but sadly, he didn’t quite get to 83. My grandma was – my grandma Shorva, who is my mother’s mother, who is the grandma of my mom, who is Marianna Shorva, she died at 73, but I was emotionally as close to her as I was to either of my parents. I think 73 then was sort of like 93 now. Just, you know, the health, the welfare and the doctoring we have now is better. She was so close to me; in many ways, I sometimes feel that she saved my life. That sounds like I’m being negative about my parents here, but she was the one who always wanted to just connect: “You and me together, we’re both going to be ourselves and we’re going to go out to White Castle and we’re going to go down to Dinkytown and…” She would share her feelings too, and both of my parents shared their feelings too, probably more than average parents, but my grandma was a completely caring, encompassing, loving, darling, darling, woman, so I did have that experience. My mother was fascinating as she aged; she kept saying that her mind was not as good. She kept saying, “I don’t think as well, and I don’t remember as well.” And I believe her; you have to believe what people say is right about themselves. But at the same time, for us, she seemed just as intelligent, just as witty, just as amazingly brilliant, as she ever had. And that was fun to be with; she deteriorated more physically. So it was very interesting. And then my husband’s father, Henry, an absolutely brilliant man, a brilliant, brilliant man, from the New York, New Jersey area, he actually did start to lose his brain, as you do when you have dementia or whatever, so he would actually
repeat things, literally, 42 times – the same story, over and over. And he would not
remember anything. These were his last five years. And so, with him, I always used to
wonder, “Why do I still have such a great time with him? Why do I feel so good around
him?” And the reason is that he still had a body that – I just liked his body. I liked his
face and I liked his ears and I liked being around him. He had a great laugh. You could
watch a show, for example, My Fair Lady. He would get such joy out of it. It didn’t
matter that his brain didn’t work as it used to, five to ten years earlier. It didn’t matter to
me at all, but it did matter to my husband, because my husband’s favorite thing with his
dad was intellectual discussion, debate, and investigation. For me, that wasn’t my role
with Henry as much. I found myself just as wonderfully happy around him as I was
before, when he was more able to think clear. It’s very interesting.

Peter Shea: I suppose my problem as I think about becoming older, to be able to say
honestly that the adventure continues, to be able to have faith that I’ll be able to say that
at 80.

Freya Manfred: And not be depressed?

Peter Shea: Not to think that the adventure ended, and I’m just waiting around.

Freya Manfred: Truly, truly there was a sense of waiting around a little bit with both my
mother and Henry at the end. That’s true. Likely, my mother, that was only for her for a
short time. After she’d broken her hip, from then on it was waiting. Yeah, you’re right. I
worry about that too. I worry about “how will it go, towards the end?” I like how you said
that. I agree with you.

Peter Shea: You sound both hopeful and optimistic.

Freya Manfred: No, I’m also terrified and worried. I would like to get to a place where I
say, as if I were a soldier almost, as I would imagine a soldier to be. I don’t know very
many soldiers. I would say, “Look, we are all going to die, and I’m going to die. I am
really really wasting my time sitting here worrying about whether in the last five months
or the last five years, I’m going to be in constant pain, unable to think, and can’t have any
fun when my sons come over – or grandsons if I have any.” There’s got to be a time
where maybe I can get past the fears that I really do have about getting older – or fears, or
worries, and say that, since it’s going to happen, and I don’t know how it’s going to
happen, I could just die in my sleep, which of course everyone wants to do, almost
everyone, I can’t do anything about it. I should enjoy what I have now with this year, this
month, this day, this hour, this moment. Most of the poems I’m writing now are about
being older, almost all of them. I have one poem called “The Curious Old Hag With
Tentacles.” It talks about being a watcher, which is all I ever wanted to be is a watcher
and toucher, because octopuses have eight arms to touch with instead of two. It was all I
ever wanted to be. So, I was worried about what would happen if I couldn’t do those
things: watch and touch. So that’s what that poem is about. I find talking about it is
actually a good thing. I talk about it with Tom once a while. I thought I was the only
person afraid in this house, and I said something about it to him, and he said, “What are
you talking about? I’m afraid every day about going forward. How will it be?” And when you see – I don’t know how your mom is doing, but I remember the bad times with my mom…

**Peter Shea:** We’ve been very lucky, so far.

**Freya Manfred:** John Resmerski’s wife was lucky, Lorna. Her mom lived to be 100 and something. The day before she died she was in the kitchen baking a cake. Talk about lucky!

**Peter Shea:** I’ve got to do some more interviews at those ages. The oldest I’ve done hundred and three. And she was splendid. I really have to, for my own comfort, start going above 100.

**Freya Manfred:** That’s a great thing to do. There’s a book a woman wrote, Neenah Ellis; it’s called *If I Live to be 100*. I love that book. She wrote that, after she interviewed people who had lived to be very very old. She concentrates, I think, on ten or eight people and tells their story. She was nervous when she was 42 about getting old – which surprised me: at the time I was 46, and I wasn’t nervous about it, older than she. She interviews men and women and people of different races.

**Peter Shea:** I guess I want to ask something, and I don’t know quite what, about having written poetry so long, especially about having written about nature or having been concerned about nature for so long. What do you know that’s emerging, changing?

**Freya Manfred:** You mean in the world of nature?

Peter Shea: In the world of nature and your own writing about it. There’s this phenomenon where once you say something and you have it down, then you think of something else, because you have it down. I’m wondering what it’s like to have pursued that process of putting it down for 50 years.

**Freya Manfred:** Even though I love nature and feel like being out in it formed a great deal of who I am and what I write, many of my poems actually are about family and feelings like fear and loneliness and bitterness. I have a recent poem called *Bitterness* or *Bitter*. So I wasn’t only writing about nature; it’s just that it wove its way into my work. But one thing I thought of while you were asking your question is that as I’ve gotten older, when a poem does have stars in it or water in it or ocean in it, I seem to be able to knit together two or three aspects of whatever the nature is rather than just concentrating on a tree, or a rabbit, I seem to be slightly better at including, you might say, a bigger scene, a larger canvas – just looking at a larger canvas. I agree with something that Robert Bly has said which is that it’s very good to know, by the end of a poem, what the poet is feeling. I agree with him. I don’t like reading a poem if I can’t tell by the end with the person is feeling. I don’t like a poem that just endlessly describes a tree or something and you have no idea what the person is feeling about it – just the description itself alone. I would like more, and I think I’ve gotten better at doing that as I’ve gotten older. I really
am not great at looking at my own work and understanding much about it.

**Peter Shea:** Who is it for? Has the who that it’s for changed? Or do you think about who you’re writing for?

**Freya Manfred:** No, you said it right at the end. I don’t really think about who I am writing for. It is really a surprise to me when I get a letter from someone in Iran and they love two poems that I wrote about men, because they’re having trouble with men in their lives. So who am I writing for? Just this invisible creature that I was trying to talk about earlier, that I met when I was little, when I was alone – just this kind of atmosphere or creature I started to talk with, who of course no one else would see, because it’s just some sort of friend – like an imaginary friend. I am really writing for an imaginary friend, which really means I’m writing for myself, in a way, because an imaginary friend comes up to meet you out of yourself. I had an imaginary friend when I was little; did you have one?

**Peter Shea:** I don’t think so.

**Freya Manfred:** You might, though, if you were to think about it.

**Peter Shea:** I might. I have a disconnect from my youth, and so there are things I don’t know. Wherever this friend came from, I just can’t resist asking what he or she was like.

**Freya Manfred:** A good pal – the best pal in the world, and the one that doesn’t die when I die. That’s about the best I can describe.

**Peter Shea:** T.S. Eliot: “I am moved by fancies that are curled about these images and cling – the notion of some infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing.”

**Freya Manfred:** Oh, that’s wonderful.

**Peter Shea:** Maybe that’s what he’s writing about.

**Freya Manfred:** What poem is that from?

**Peter Shea:** I don’t remember anymore; I kind of ate Eliot – which is nice because he comes back in little pieces. That one moved me. And my cousin wrote a thing called “Letter to an Imaginary Friend.”

**Freya Manfred:** Was Thomas McGrath your cousin?

**Peter Shea:** Yes, so I sort of had that title in my head. It resonates.

**Freya Manfred:** Did you live up in North Dakota with him?

**Peter Shea:** I visited my grandparents who were a quarter of a mile down the road, and
Tom would come over occasionally to talk to them. They were always cordial, because there were three hours of conversation about him after he left. His spouse had the only leather skirt that had been seen in North Dakota. I am sure there are more now.

**Freya Manfred:** That’s fantastic. I had the great opportunity to meet him too, a few times. I really enjoyed talking with him the few times I did – talk about dying: he was in so much pain before he died but what a great poet. What a great, great poet.

**Peter Shea:** That might raise a question to explore a little bit: have there been meetings, perhaps with other writers, perhaps with other kinds of people, that have been central for you?

**Freya Manfred:** Oh yes, that’s a good question. I think about it. People you can say just about anything too. They don’t seem particularly surprised. They just go with that. Whatever it is you’re talking about. Would you mind saying that question again?

**Peter Shea:** Have there been meetings with other writers or with other people important to you that have been kind of central for you?

**Freya Manfred:** Well, of course, James Wright – James Wright because I loved his work, I loved the way he taught other people’s work, and I loved how he could understand what I was trying to say in a poem, and appreciate it, and feel joy about finding it, and then, because I so loved what he did, that was good. Then later, I went to some writer’s colonies at Yaddo and MacDowell – Yaddo in New York, and MacDowell in New Hampshire. When I was at Yaddo, the people were very philosophical that I met: Edmund Burke and the critic Alfred Kazin and some others. I actually didn’t learn much from them. The one I thought was the most interesting man – and I also love his writing – was Bernard Malamud. He just came only one night to dinner there; he wasn’t staying there as a guest. The way he dealt with talking about his own work was fascinating to me and since I loved his work – there was a tremendous dignity and directness about him. I don’t want to say “simplicity;” I think probably “direct” is better than “simple.” He just was a guy, a guy – and he seemed very interested in other people, and I love the way he makes a story. So I thought to myself, “If I ever write fiction, I really would like to be able to write as well as he does.” It was fun to see him; it was great. Knowing Robert Bly’s been great. When I first met him he was very kind of annoying a little bit because he would look at a poem I wrote… I remember I wrote a poem about a man jumping off a waterfall in Sioux Falls, South Dakota and he liked the last two lines but not the first twenty. I was just shattered because I thought I had at least more than two good lines in this poem. But he didn’t act that way later. He very much changed how he looked at my work and the work of others, I think. He could still point out that this isn’t working or that isn’t working or a word isn’t working, and he still does that brilliantly, but he meant a lot to me because he talked a lot about – I remember going to a talk that he gave about depression, about being depressed and you could tell that he had been depressed and that he got it; he knew what it was – far more than I do, far more than I do. But I’ve had friends, family that have suffered from that, far more than myself. I was so glad he was talking about this feeling that – people don’t talk enough about it – almost as if the
When I was at Yaddo, I actually briefly met Philip Roth, and over the years, I’ve kept in touch with Philip Roth. His writing has actually come to mean more to me as I’ve gotten older. I loved some of his writing; other parts of this writing I liked. I didn’t like this book called *Breast* but, anyway, I love some of his writing, and he’s just so different from me. He’s from a different milieu; he’s from New Jersey – Newark. He’s around people who talk fast and are witty and bright, and he is witty and bright. What I’ve liked about him is: he listens; he’s an incredibly good listener. He follows what you’re saying and takes it to some other level, which of course is true of my husband too, so as a writer, my husband has meant a great deal to me. He’s a screenwriter and he also writes essays and nonfiction. But there’s a bad reason why I like Philip Roth – it’s not bad, but here I judge myself a little – he’s Philip Roth – ta-da – everybody knows him; he’s this big famous person. I think part of the reason I was excited to be around him a little bit was just because, “Okay, he’s famous.” It’s like somebody giving off fame sparks or something. That went away rather quickly for me. It went away very quickly. I soon saw, very luckily, that he was really no different from all the other writers I’d met who were less famous, non-writers I’d met. He was just this person. Why did he mean so much to me? Because I don’t think I’ve ever run into another writer – I’ve heard Tim O’Brien is like this too – Philip Roth just works so hard. He works all day. He doesn’t take a break, hardly. He doesn’t stop. I wonder how his early life really has been, from talking with him. He can’t enjoy a party because he has to get home and write. This is how he is, or how he used to be. He couldn’t enjoy a conversation, because he has to get home and write. He couldn’t enjoy a vacation, because he has to write. Every sentence is so worked upon and so carefully done. I admire that a great deal; if you’re going to write something, you might as well write something that’s good – that’s really, really strong and stands up: the words hold their place. I admire that. I admire that a lot. So it’s been fun to know him, because he’s just different. He’s a New York Jew, and I’m a Midwestern Slovak and Frisian. It’s a big difference. It’s kind of wonderful. Those are the people I can think of right now.

I am trying to think – oh, Meridel LeSueur – She was marvelous too. Oh my God, she was incredible! She’s so supportive, so loving, so intense, so proud to be a woman, so proud to be a strong liberal, so proud of her children and her grandchildren. I just thought she was like a great ideal aunt, a great wonderful aunt or a godmother person to me. So there you go; there is a great bunch of people that I’ve met, was very lucky to have met.

**Peter Shea:** There’s always a problem when you meet great people: I have had the privilege of meeting a few great people, and also, because I interview across a broad spectrum, I have had the privilege of meeting famous people I did not know to be famous.

**Freya Manfred:** Oh, that’s better.

**Peter Shea:** People whom I did not treat with anything like appropriate respect. That was kind of fun. I suppose the question is how one makes sense of the fact that one admires
someone, and one isn’t them.

**Freya Manfred:** The words that suddenly came to me – my father used to talk about something called “permissible arrogance.” He being a Calvinist in his background was very worried about being mean, or anybody that was not fair, or – I don’t know if that’s what Calvinists are or not – but his religious upbringing made him partly worried in almost a guilty way that he might not be being fair to people; he might not be being honest. It was a very important to him that to be fair and honest – goodhearted and not cruel. That doesn’t mean he was always goodhearted and never cruel. Forget about the Calvinist thing; I don’t even know how to go into that part. He left that church. But he used to talk about “permissible arrogance.” I was a little worried that what I was about to say might sound arrogant, but then I thought, “Maybe this can be his permissible arrogance moment.” What I think about admiring someone and you’re not them: I’m not sure “admire” is the word I really feel about Philip Roth. I’m not even sure I admired Meridel LeSueur. I’m sure I admired my dad. You know, that is very bizarre. I don’t really know. I think what I felt about Philip Roth was more like the same age, if that makes any sense. Even though he was ten or 12 years older than I, I felt like I was the same age as him, whereas Meridel was older, and Robert was older – Robert Bly. I don’t know how much older Robert is – at least 15 years. With Philip Roth, I felt like on the same age level, even though he’s 12 years older. I’m at a loss for words here. I just felt like there is this amazing creature there, and he seems to think I am an amazing creature. We treat each other like we can both do something pretty good. He likes what I do, which was very nice to hear over time, and helped me a lot, a lot like with Jim Wright. Jim Wright seemed younger to me too. I’m not doing very well with this. There was a boyish quality maybe when I first met Philip Roth, and I suppose I had a girlish quality. I didn’t like *The Breast*, but I liked *Portnoy’s Complaint*. I thought that was really wonderful. I wouldn’t want to be him. I kind of wanted to be more like Meridel. But again, I wouldn’t want to write like Meridel. I don’t know because later, some of the riffs – it’s like jazz – in Philip Roth’s work, I admire so much. I admire the way he can describe something so much. I guess the idea of being someone else is not good, doesn’t feel good to me. I wouldn’t want to be someone else. I wish I could have other people here to get their opinions, because I don’t know what else to say about this. I didn’t want to be any of these people – maybe just a little bit Meridel because of her glowing woman-ness, and I’m a woman. And sometimes I want to be my husband, because he is so incredibly witty and gets to the point. It isn’t that hard for me. I guess I’m lucky. I don’t worry about that very much. I think it’s something about “admire” – that word. “Respect” I like. I like that word, “respect.” But respect has a little more distance to it, so I wouldn’t want to be – you’re not becoming the other one. It’s respecting: they’re there and you’re here. That’s the best I can do with that one.

**Peter Shea:** So “admire” has something of “desiring that man’s scope?”

**Freya Manfred:** Yes, “Desiring this man’s art and that man’s scope, With what I most enjoy contented least.” I don’t lie in bed at night worried that I’m not writing as good as Phillip Roth. I can’t possibly do it; I have to do my own thing. And I don’t lie in bed about any of these people, even Meridel. The writing is mine; it’s all mine, and I couldn’t
be the other one. I might want to have their face, or their good body, or whatever. I don’t want anybody else’s writing. Painting – I’d like someone else’s painting when I paint. I don’t feel good enough as a painter.

**Peter Shea:** We are about two minutes from the end, and I wanted to ask – I’m imagining that if this project goes the way I want it to go, someday in some school somewhere, some sixth grade kid is going to report on you because you’re one name on a list of names of people, and this kid probably didn’t have a writer for a father, but she’s written a few things and has that as a possible life, to do some writing, or as a possible avocation. Is there anything you’d want to say to a person like that?

**Freya Manfred:** Yes. Believe that you have a lot of friends, and those are the people in the books in the library that have written the poems. Edna St Vincent Millay if you like poetry is a good friend, and James Wright could be a good friend. These people are your friends, because they’re your family, in a way. You might not have closeness in your own family or maybe you do. Your own family might not be interested in the same things you are. If you really really enjoy putting words on the page, and the feeling that comes from that, and other people are enjoying what you do at least to some degree, just some degree, your friends are all in the library, the other writers. In real life, writers can be rather mean to each other at times or ignore each other or put each other down, but in fact their work is reaching out to you in friendship. Your work could fit in, if that makes any sense. That’s one thing I would say. The other thing I would say is gravitate to people who are supportive of you, supportive of what you’re doing, if you can.