

Farewell To Helen W. Arehart

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By Kurt Arehart

Of our recently deceased, dearly missed, we often say: "She is in a better place now; beyond pain and suffering; no longer troubled by the cares of man." Helen crossed into this form of heaven when her suffering grew too great and she was placed into full hospice care. All her medications were replaced with a steady course of morphine, both removing her pain and calming her body's anxious and unconscious fight against the failure rising within. No longer did caregivers pull her out of bed and into a wheelchair for long periods of confused discomfort. No longer was she placed among many other elders, some loud and bellicose, so foreign to her gentle soul. No longer was she pushed and cajoled to eat more than she wanted.

Her time passed in an easy peace, the lines of trouble and pain gone from her face. She wandered through her earliest childhood as the recordings of her long life continued to unwind and drift into eternity.

Myrtle Kohr, Helen's beloved mother, in her final years also lived among her earliest memories and would speak often of her gentle and lovely mother Jenny Creep. With clouded eyes gazing into the mists of time she would speak on the edge of tears recalling the kindnesses observed. This was a child-like admiration, simple and one dimensional in its recollection and telling. And now Helen Arehart did the same, speaking of the gentle kindness of her mother Myrtle. Each, as they descended the mental curve, retained access to this deeply important story. When all else unwound and escaped, this core valuing of gentle kindness remained.

I live in Raleigh, North Carolina, an eight hour drive from Philadelphia and so my visits to Helen were less frequent. I would plan to visit after lunch, when Helen's energy might be best, and plan to stay two or three hours. My mission was to reach her at a spiritual, emotional level, to pull her up

and recall her wonderful life and all the good she had done, people she had helped. Two tools proved helpful: I would read Helen's poems to her and discuss the life events that called each into being. And having recently taken up the ukulele as a growth-in-retirement project, I would play and sing to her, mostly songs she knew well. Even towards the end, Helen would often be roused to recite the last line of many of her poems and sing along with well known songs. And she always tracked the lyrics, raising occasional objections. I learned to stop singing John Lennon's Imagine, "... Nothing to kill or die for, and no religion too", and a few more that vexed her.

A typical visit would be song and poems, with breaks for conversation whenever a lyric or verse would trigger her to speak on good parenting, kindness and generosity, all at the core of her being.

She would speak of her mother Myrtle Kohr and grandmother Jenny Creep, heros both. Myrtle offered food to any who came to the door during the great depression, when the family's own food security was far from certain. The family's own dire circumstances made Myrtle keenly aware of those with even less. Her response was to share what little she had, rather than hoard. Jenny and William Creep were the same before her. William baked beans for sale to restaurants and saloons of the day. (Saloons offered free beans if you came in and bought a beer) No one who called at the beanery door was turned away hungry. And so Helen rose from a deep legacy of kindness of spirit, of generosity. It was in her blood, central to family lore, and modeled before her eyes. She could do no less.

Helen's expression of kindness and generosity came in the many people she helped, within the family and without, often in confidence to preserve the dignity and privacy of the beneficiary. She came to the aid of family with unconditional duty.

She was a lifelong learner and voracious reader, a volunteer reading tutor and a leader of Christian education. Perhaps her biggest project as an educator was what I like to call the 'Kitchen Table Lecture Series'. As a child and teen I was perhaps her most avid audience and she would regale me with tales of Doc Sterner, an outstanding instructor at Frankford High School, who was the bright light of her education. She was an independent thinker whose beliefs were well founded and persuasively presented. As I munched my morning cereal Helen would lean against the kitchen sink facing me and dive into the human experience, often keying on politics, gender issues and comparative religious systems. She was no fan of the Hindu caste system and often railed against the strictures of the Roman Catholic Church as they existed during her high school years.

This tale sticks with me: Doc Sterner had assigned reading the bible as literature. A catholic classmate and close friend felt compelled to read the bible in secret, since the Catholic Church at that time forbade lay people from reading the bible, as they were deemed unable to correctly interpret it. The friend's younger sister discovered this sinful behavior and told all, and so she was forced to perform penitent rituals at church early each morning before school for months. Thus was an intellectual rebellion put down. Reading forbidden did not sit well with Helen.

The failings of the rhythm method of contraception, another Catholic prescription, were also attacked. Helen pointed out to me in a matter-of-fact way, that a woman's estrous cycle caused the time of peak fertility to also be when she most wanted to welcome her husband's advances. The church's strictures thus robbed sex (and marriage in general) of much of its joy, and laid the responsibility squarely on the woman. Gender inequality did not sit well with Helen.

I also recall her insight around the philandering of men in leadership positions. She observed that the same extreme drive that caused a man to aggressively climb to wealth and power often found expression in an

inflated sense of entitlement and an unusually strong sexual drive, very difficult to control. History continues to bear her out.

Such adult considerations washed over me at the breakfast table from about age 12 and on and formed an important pillar of my education and world view. If I were to make a stupid mistake in my youth, it would not be out of ignorance. Paradoxically, this fueled a Dennis-The-Menace period where I was equipped with much adult insight and knowledge, but without the wisdom of when to share and when to hold my peace.

Helen was raised a Methodist and switched to being a Lutheran for Bob, becoming deeply committed to her faith community at Saint James. But I think really, at her core, she was most like a Quaker, with her quiet kindness, deep empathy and gentle persuasion. I remember her absorbing my adolescent venting and outbursts at some slight from a teacher, then calmly helping me recenter on my goal and often supplying a communication strategy most likely to succeed. And it never included shouting or pettiness. She was never the manipulator. Guilt was never in her tool box. Her communication, her love, was unconditional and without guile.

I am startled to recognize how very much she shaped the man I have tried to be.

Helen was well ahead of her time as a full life partner in her marriage, no second class citizen. She had full control of the family budget, and so full knowledge of family finances. She was in lockstep with Bob in their careful spending and heavy saving. I never heard a note of disagreement between them in money matters, or anything else.

These quiet, gentle souls discussed their differences and found their common ground in privacy, never in front of their children or anyone else.

They presented a united front to the world. I have found this a brilliant approach to parenting and the wider world.

Their lovely retirement, those golden years, were well earned, and we enjoyed watching them take their river boat cruises and winter in Florida as they continued to put time and treasure into helping those in need.

Toward the end I watched her slip away like a sailboat that drops below the horizon. Ever so slowly. So much like a setting sun.

My brother Rob, my sister Dawn, we three are so lucky: to be made up of the stuff of Helen and Bob Arehart, and to have been raised in their thoughtful, deeply kind and nurturant home. They are with us always.