

An Interview with Betty 2007.110

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I picked Betty up at the Devereux Nursing Home in Marblehead at three^ethirty. She spends from three to four hours every afternoon there visiting her husband Earl who is suffering from what "they" (the doctors, staff and assorted commentators) believe to be arteriosclerosis.

Betty is eighty-six years old and looking forward most this year to attending her sixty-fifth Smith College reunion. The first thing she said to me when she got in the car was, "Oh, let's just keep driving and leave here. I'd just like to leave town and get away. Just go"

Instead we had tea and cookies at her house (Oh, let's go to my place," she said, "so I can get settled for the evening. It's so nice to have all this time to chat. If you hadn't picked me up I'd have had to take the Elder Bus and go all over town till they dropped me off. THANK YOU, dear.") [Someday I would like to do a study of the word "dear" and how context, tone and need dictate its meaning. The elderly are "deared" to death in hospitals and restaurants. As a matter of fact all women are in hospitals, and, of course, so are babies. Yet the word has an immense range of intent.--"Dear, you forgot your keys--AGAIN." The latter is a wife addressing her husband.] Betty's "dear" to me was warm, direct, affectionate and COLLEGIAL.

Over our cups of "Constant Comment" Betty repeated what she had first said in response to my query as to whether she might help me and our class of seminarians by chatting about her experience. "Oh, it is so wonderful to think anyone really cares. I would love to talk with you...."

Betty feels the prime of her life was the twenties so far as formative ideas go. BUT--she has seen so many major changes in society that she is always critiquing "the way it was" in relation to her new insights. "Oh," she exclaims with glee and also with derision, "we were very radical in the twenties, but only in our social lives -- over what we drank or what we danced or smoked, or read. No serious radicalism." *good observation - it had to start somewhere.*

"Although I once did a very wicked thing....I was in my twenties and I went all alone to hear Norman Thomas speak once. I had to keep it very dark since it wasn't respectable to be anything but a Republican or a Democrat, and everybody you knew was a Republican. But I had been a history major, so I went anyway." Betty remembered being in Northampton when Coolidge was running for President. "It was Mrs. Coolidge we all loved," she confided. "She would wave from her porch at us students hiking around Northampton while her husband was busy breaking police strikes in Massachusetts." Just think^k that narrow man became the President on the strength of being a strike-breaker."

Betty sees herself as having lived through unbelievable political naïveté compared to the ideas of her grandchildren and compared with their activism. But, she hastens to add, "my whole life has been a movement toward engagement from my summer at the International Institute in Geneva when I was twenty six, through later membership in the League of Women Voters and, particularly, living in post-WWII Austria when the Russians withdrew after the Occupation and took most of the country's treasures and wealth with them. I saw how the Marshall Plan of the US cared, and managed the way in which recovery was possible for much of Europe. We supervised without controlling our "charity" and it worked. No Noriega with blank checks or the horror of the Contras in Central America."

There is much anecdotal material I could relate but I think it is more important to convey two deep impressions:

1) Betty had met me in a state of intense emotional stress and fatigue after her daily visit with a deeply depressed and often disoriented spouse. Yet, simply being involved in a conversation about things which were stimulating and through which many of her happiest memories surfaced gave her immediate pleasure and vitality. She is a care-taker still, at eighty-six, and yet, amidst the difficulties, she speaks of how she enjoys being happy. There is a sense in which people regard her as surrounded by gloom because of the circumstances she is in and consequently as a person whose life is the burden she is carrying. She finds it difficult to express joy as if to be so implies thoughtlessness or forgetfulness of the situation. She ~~herself~~ ^{clearly} broke her shoulder before Christmas and yet she holds her husband up (literally) during her visits and comes home with an aching right arm to shovel her walk.

Yes - it's so simple but so hard.

Betty is dedicated to her daughters and grandchildren all of whom live out of state. The grandchildren are a source of delight because they find the world she knew "exotic" and fascinating. There is excitement for her in their genuine desire to share her memories and her present views. She can tell them about standing in downtown Detroit with her Father when the first contingent of American troops left for WWI (World War ONE) and how afterwards her mother and she ~~rolled~~^{rolled} bandages only when they prepared to do so by donning white, starched aprons. She traveled to the East Coast as a very young girl and was considered a celebrity for having the opportunity by envious classmates. When her father discovered a "smelly" bottle of sea water in her trunk he heaved it off the Wolverine that was hurtling back to Detroit from Boston declaring, "There goes the Atlantic Ocean."

2) Betty ~~values~~^{views} most her awareness of growth in her own life and the possibility of it in all lives. She sees herself as having moved from self-preoccupation to a deep concern for others through education and exposure to real need in the post-depression society of her young adulthood. She is totally unsentimental about her early life of ease and has a deep sense of social responsibility. The last book she has finished is Jill Conway's The Road from Coorain. It is not only her deep loyalty to Smith which made her find the story gripping. A person of privilege herself, Betty relates with a deep human compassion to those who came through hardships of all kinds whether economic, social or emotional. It is sobering to realize how much of all of these she is bearing now at this most fragile end of her life.

ADDENDUM: Because I had mistakenly only written talking notes for this report and typed it up tonight (Feb. 8) I have had the opportunity to tell Betty something of our class session this morning. I called her at five this afternoon to thank her for her input and her tea. This has proven to be the most important aspect of the interview. She wants us all to know how pleased she is to be involved, even indirectly, in older folk mattering in ways unrelated to their "inconvenience" to society.

Very heartening to hear it - she's lucky that others want to hear her memories.