Grace Notes

Remembering Grace Paley (1922–2007)

From the Teachers & Writers archives, Grace Paley in a T&W classroom, c. 1968 (top), and at various T&W events.

Grace Paley in Thetford Hill, Vermont. Photo ©2000 by Christopher Felver/ CORBIS.

The news, in late August, that Grace Paley had passed away came as a blow not because it was unexpected, but because it was difficult for many of us to imagine a world absent her remarkable presence. Here at Teachers & Writers Collaborative Paley has been a guiding spirit for the forty years we have been in existence. From the very beginning she put her stamp on the organization, contributing a rare blend of passion and common sense to the raucous early meetings where T&W was created. "Every time Grace stood up to speak," recalled Paley's friend, the poet Jane Cooper, in an interview, "she would say something quite short and sensible, and it would be like, 'I think we should start in our own neighborhoods. My school is next to my apartment building. That's where I've been working.'" Later, Paley helped draft a statement—which served as a founding credo for T&W—criticizing the "milky texts and toneless curriculum" used in too many schools, and urging that kids be given the freedom "to invent the language by which they manage the world." [from an interview by Christian McEwen in "Four Women," Teachers & Writers, *vol. 24, no. 4]*

"Our idea," Paley said in her address at T&W's 1996 Educating the Imagination event, "was that children—by writing, by putting down words, by reading, by beginning to love literature, by the inventiveness of listening to one another—could begin to understand the world better and to make a better world for themselves. That always seemed to me such a natural idea that I've never understood why it took so much aggressiveness and so much time to get it started!"

In a tribute to Paley, writer and PEN American Center President Francine Prose called her "a revolutionary American writer" because Paley wrote about "a world I knew about but hadn't seen in literature: New York, mothers and children, playgrounds, subways, and old age homes." Paley's writing and her life were of a piece. Her passion for the world she knew came across not only in her wonderful fiction and poetry, but also in her tireless work against injustice, and her unfailing generosity to her students. We at T&W are grateful for the many gifts she gave us, not least of which is a model of the writer as teacher and activist that will not soon be forgotten. — Editor

JAN HELLER LEVI

A Little Grace

I was sitting in Washington Square Park, under the tall breezy trees, and re-reading her.

> I saw my ex-husband on the street. I was sitting on the steps of the new library.
>
> *Hello, my life*, I said. We had once been married for twenty-seven years, so I felt justified.
>
> He said, *What? What life? No life of mine.*
>
> I said, *O.K.* I don't argue when there's real disagreement. I got up and went into the library to see how much I owed them.
>
> The librarian said *$32 even and you've owed it for eighteen years.*
>
> — from "Wants," in *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*

* * *

> "Women," said Grandma in appreciation, "have been the pleasure and consolation of my entire life. From the beginning I cherished all the little girls with their clean faces and their listening ears. . . . "
>
> — from "A Woman, Young and Old," in *The Little Disturbances of Man*

* * *

> My husband gave me a broom one Christmas. This wasn't right. No one can tell me it was meant kindly.
>
> — from "An Interest in Life," in *The Little Disturbances of Man*

So there I was sitting in the park, re-reading wonderful her, under the breezy trees, and a pretty, happy sun. And I suddenly heard a crazy man at the west entrance to the park ranting at passersby, and the children in the nearby playground started screeching, and one of those park jeeps pulled up right in front of the bench where I was reading, and two young parks employees started chatting one another up while the one who was in the driver's seat kept the motor idling. I wanted to scream out, "Hey, can't everybody shut up! I'm reading Grace Paley and I can't concentrate!" And then I started to laugh, because I knew all this noise, all these voices, all these "interruptions"—they're what Grace made her stories out of. I thought of something that great naturalist John Burroughs said: "To know is not all, it is only half. To love is the other half." Grace truly loved this city, she loved its people. She loved things and people, and even countries, with all their mess-ups and messiness. Her art, and her life, included the crazy man ranting, and the children screeching, and the two young, bored park workers making the small talk that connected them to one another, to the park, to the city, to the breezy trees, to the pretty, happy sun on this particular day.

* * *

Elaine:	Well, you know, grace is a tough one. I like to think I have a little grace. . . .
Job Interviewer:	You can't have a little grace. You either have grace or you don't.
Elaine:	Okay, fine. I have no grace.
Job Interviewer:	And you can't acquire grace.
Elaine:	Well, I have no intention of getting grace.
Job Interviewer:	Grace isn't something you can pick up at the market.

— from a *Seinfeld* episode

* * *

Well, you know, I like to think I had a little Grace. For thirty-three years: that's how lucky I am.

* * *

I was twenty, and a brand new sophomore at Sarah Lawrence College when I first saw her from afar. She was walking toward the writing classrooms building called Andrews. I think she was wearing a wide skirt, and a peasant-style blouse (it's 1974, remember) and her hair was kind of piled, kind of arranged, kind of rational, kind of wonderfully anarchic, on top of an all-purposeful, wide-awake face. She looked like the future and the past all bundled up in good common sense and silly flamboyance, with no make-up. *Who is that*? I asked someone. *That's Grace*, she said. *Grace Paley*. *Oh*, I thought (because I had just read her stories that past summer), *that's what a great writer can look like.*

I never took a class with Grace, but she was my advisor at Sarah Lawrence (we called our advisors our Dons there), and she hugged me and she read my poems, and she cheered me on, and she worried about me.

Me, one day:	I'm not writing.
Grace:	Oh. Why not?
Me:	I don't feel like I have anything to say.
Grace:	Of course you do. You just think you don't have anyone to say it to. Say it to *me*.

Ladies and gentlemen, and all human beings along the gender spectrum, I am here today to tell you that a line like that, from Grace Paley, will keep you writing for at least thirty-three years.

* * *

And don't think I don't know that she likely said that same thing, or something like it, to dozens, maybe hundreds, of us over the years. I'm not claiming I was special. I'm claiming she was—to extend that offer to so many of us who needed it, and need-

ed her, so much. And even if we didn't write, never wrote again, she gave us her love anyway.

* * *

I like to think I had a little Grace. I know we all had a little Grace (and some really lucky and worthy ones had a lot). Take any year in any decade, when you were despairing over something real and demented that was happening in the world, and you were feeling helpless. You could follow Grace's example—though she never insisted that you do—and do something like step over a low chain link fence surrounding the lawn at the White House in 1978, and with a group of other decent human beings, unfurl a banner that read "No Nuclear Power, No Nuclear Weapons." Or you could join her in a march for peace, or a civil disobedience action for social justice, or hand out pamphlets on the street for women's rights or prisoners' rights—and you could feel like you were doing something, and you could feel a little more hopeful.

Or if you were despairing about yourself, before there was Xanax, or Prozac, or Zoloft, there was Grace. Find out where she was giving a reading—and she was always giving a reading for some worthy organization or another—and get yourself to it. She'd be up on that stage, too short to reach the mike, and always having to have it adjusted for her. She'd be cracking her gum, and reading her brilliant stories (later her wonderful poems), and making you happy and making you laugh because you lived on the same planet as her.

* * *

Back to Washington Square Park. I turned the page and began to read again:

> There is a certain place where dumb-waiters boom, doors slam, dishes crash; every window is a mother's mouth bidding the street shut up, go skate somewhere else, come home. My voice is the loudest.
>
> — from "The Loudest Voice," in *The Little Disturbances of Man*

God, how I will miss her voice. God, how I will miss everything of Grace. We must all work harder now, be stronger, be dearer, be funnier, be more clear, more loving. We must all crack more gum and be louder, to make her proud of us.

Jan Heller Levi's most recent collection of poems is *Skyspeak*. She is also the editor of *A Muriel Rukeyser Reader*, and co-editor, with Sara Miles, of *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan*. She lives in New York City and Saint Gallen, Switzerland, and teaches in the Hunter College MFA program.

HERBERT KOHL

Remembering Grace Paley

REMEMBERING Grace, one event sticks out in my mind. It happened at the Writers' Congress convened by the *Nation* magazine in 1981. I was a member of a delegation representing PEN American Center, which included Executive Secretary Karen Kennerly (the first Executive Secretary of the Teachers & Writers Collaborative), Kurt Vonnegut, Grace Paley, and myself. The last session of the two-day meeting was devoted to the presentation and adoption of resolutions that would be presented to the media and the public. PEN planned to introduce a number of resolutions, one of which was to affirm a commitment to free all writers imprisoned for their work. On the surface this may not seem controversial but for a number of the delegates this was considered a dangerous position for the Congress to adopt. The main opposition to the resolution came from small, vocal groups of Marxist-Leninists who didn't want the Soviet Union and its satellites to be condemned for jailing writers considered subversive. It was clear that these people were willing to shout down the PEN resolution and disrupt the Congress in order to prevent it from being adopted.

Kurt Vonnegut was chosen to present the resolution to the assembled group. I was sitting next to him and noticed that he seemed very uneasy about being on the firing line. He turned to Karen and suggested she get someone else to make the presentation and she asked me to do it. I agreed but didn't feel very comfortable about it. On the way down the aisle I passed Grace who said, as she always did to me, "Hi, honey."

Grace's words reminded me of the power and strength of my grandmother, who is the only person other than Grace who called me honey. On an impulse I told Grace what my task was and asked her if she would stand behind me and defend the resolution after I read it. Of course, she agreed.

After I read the resolution there were boos and shouts and general disruption from people planted throughout the hall. Then Grace stepped up to the mike and waited. I seriously doubt whether any other writer in the room could have mobilized the crowd to silence the protestors. However, Grace's very presence seemed to work magic. Even the most rabid protestor was told to shut up and let Grace speak. She introduced herself, which wasn't necessary, as someone who had the credentials to speak on behalf of imprisoned writers as a writer who, herself, had acted politically and in other circumstances and societies might also be incarcerated. I believe, though I may have made this up, that she also said that almost every writer in the room might also find themselves imprisoned for their writing somewhere in the world. She spoke directly and eloquently about the right to write and be published, and asked the Congress to approve the resolution as a way of showing solidarity with every writer imprisoned for her or his work.

Then she asked me to read the resolution again. A vote was taken and it was passed without objection.

The role Grace played at the Writers' Congress was similar to the role she played throughout her life. She was a writer's writer who was also the conscience of us all. Her humor, dignity, intelligence, voice, and yes, grace shall be missed by all of us who have had the privilege of knowing her.

Herbert Kohl has been teaching and writing for over forty-five years. He was founder and first director of Teachers & Writers Collaborative, and is the acclaimed author of more than thirty books on education, including *36 Children, The Discipline of Hope, A Grain of Poetry, Stupidity and Tears*, and most recently *Painting Chinese*. He is currently Director of the Coastal Ridge Research and Education Center in Point Arena, California.

VERA B. WILLIAMS

Ah, Grace. You just can't be very far away...

When I was working with Grace, illustrating her writings for the 1990 *War Resisters League Calendar*, which later became The Feminist Press' *Long Walks And Intimate Talks*, we spent a lot of time together backing into our project.

I took a house near Thetford, Vermont for the summer. Talking all the way we sat on the lake shore, swam, drove to local vegetable stands, made soup, hung out with family and friends. Yet by September very little had made it either on to her typing or my watercolor paper. Then it went fast. She would call me with a new poem or even to scope out a piece that was working its way along. I would draw and paint. Occasionally we got together at her apartment on Eleventh Street to put the parts together. As Grace wrote in her introduction to our little book (in its first appearance as a calendar it was named *365 Ways Not To Have Another War*):

> So we worked that year sometimes together, more often alone. We thought this would be OK because of all our walks and rallies and arrests. Our minds, having taken hold in the Bronx of the thirties and forties, were on the same things. We hoped that our work would, by its happiness and sadness, demonstrate against militarists, racists, earth poisoners, women haters, all those destroyers of days. One common purpose would be to celebrate the day, which is its own reason for peace, to praise and offer to its inherent beauty and reality our work as daily movement people and artists.

Ah, Grace! She was a dear friend of mine and more than anything right now, I wish I could talk about her in the present tense. She was always so vividly present even as her attentions swooped and alighted like humming birds. When you were seated with her at a table for two you came to realize how the whole restaurant was actually her table. She was a marvelous and accurate busybody with eyes and ears everywhere as we readers know from her stories.

Grace loved the kitchen, as a place of bread and soup and family. In her New York City kitchen, there hung a painting of an earlier kitchen by her father (a physician of whom she has written much). In her Vermont kitchen her loving interest touched, in recent years, often on her grandchildren, but also on a bird's song, her thriving Russian Olive tree, her ailing rubber plant, a radio or newspaper item right along with the poem in progress there on the dining table, and the soup boiling on the stove. Grace loved cooking in ordinary enameled pots which luckily could be bought at the local hardware store which Grace also favored. All those pots came to have somewhat scorched bot-

toms, a side effect of her excitement with everything around her and her impulse to help parent the wide world.

It was an impulse that took her from family and typewriter and friends to Vietnam and to Chile and to Nicaragua as well the board meetings of PEN; the community and school board meetings of both Greenwich Village and Thetford Vermont; a cot in a New York City women's prison (then on Ninth Street); a sleeping bag on the ground at Seabrook, New Hampshire, projected site of a nuclear power plant; and so many other sites of protest and vigil in New York state, Washington, D.C., and Red Square in Moscow. But it was always back again, always and always to family, typewriter, and friends.

I, who lose things a lot, felt for her as she lost keys and mixed up her papers, alarmingly juggled stuff till the last joking minute. But she made it all work so that her devotion to this world and every living part of it could triumph.

It *is* amazing how she paid attention to so so much and most particularly to each and every word, comma, and space (but not one extra) needed to tell, to warn, and to praise. This attention to the necessity and the pleasure of the just-right word, phrasing, and rhythm too, went into leaflets as well as poems and stories.

A real masterpiece of political writing is Grace's *Unity Statement for the Women's Pentagon Action*. It was also a feat of patience rooted in her faith in a democratic process that invited suggestion and comment from women up and down the East Coast. Most of us would have despaired but Grace worked all the contributions into a piece that has both power and beauty and could make you cry. Grace and I and many other women were arrested reciting our Unity Statement while blocking entrances to the Pentagon.

Ah, Grace… Dear friend... in case your spirit is still worried about not getting to everything that needed fixing, don't be. You stuck with it all through sickness as long as you possibly could. I will remember you in your flannel nightgown doing some last-minute changes on a poem for me to read at OWN (Older Women's Network) to which we both belonged.

Even

Even at pain's deafening intrusion
my friend   could not forget the pleasant blasphemous joking
of our daily conversations
she said grace don't take me out
of the telephone book of your heart   and I
have not   there she is under S for Syb and
Claiborne still under C

Ah, Grace... You will be like that in my heart now.

Vera B. Williams. Among the thirteen books for children she's written and illustrated, *Chair For My Mother* and *More More More Said The Baby* are Caldecott Honor winners. Her paintings and drawings are also in *Long Walks and Intimate Talks,* by Grace Paley (Feminist Press). She's lived lots of places but is a New York City kid. Childhood first and foremost has been her wellspring; parenting also, outdoor adventuring, activism for peace and justice, teaching. At a recent school visit, a child still learning English shyly told her she thought she would look "more new". She turns 80 this year.

40th Anniversary

Playful Mayhem and Knowledge

A Writer Looks Back on His Time in a 1970s T&W Classroom

GABRIEL BROWNSTEIN

When asked if he would contribute a piece to the magazine for T&W's 40th anniversary year, novelist and short story writer Gabriel Brownstein responded with immediate enthusiasm: "Teachers & Writers was a huge part of my life as a kid," he wrote in an e-mail. "I remember their room clearly and fondly, and all the comic books and plays and movies that we made. I learned a tremendous amount there and loved it." — Editor

I STILL BOAST THAT PHILLIP LOPATE WAS MY TEACHER IN GRADE SCHOOL. It's not exactly true. Mrs. Rosenfeld was my teacher for the last grades at P.S. 75, but Lopate was one of the people in charge of the Teachers & Writers Collaborative project there and of the room down the hall where we drew our comics. Or at least that's what I did in that room—other people wrote stories, or put together a literary magazine titled *Spicy Meatball*. I did comics.

This may not seem, on the face of it, a suitable or dignified curriculum for elementary school kids, especially these days when New York City public school kids get homework in kindergarten and spend large portions of third and fourth grades studying for standardized tests. I like to think—who knows for sure? —that I spent as much time in my fourth grade on comics as kids these days do on test prep.

In my recollection we ran down the hall to that art room in a herd. There were long, white, Formica-topped tables there, plenty of pens and pencils and thick white paper for comic books, some pages with the comic's frames already mapped out for us conventionally, with a dozen or so forming a grid over the paper, others mapped out unconventionally, with three small boxes on top, and a blown-up irregular box in the middle, maybe a final box on the bottom right, perfect for a punch-line or a story's denouement.

At P.S. 75, the great genius of comic books was Theo Cobb, who used ink washes and shadings and intense grimacing close-ups, and who was far ahead of us in the formal experimentations that we admired. In our class, Jon Bornholdt was the man. We all recognized his originality and the intricacy and care of his drawings. Mostly, he did slaughterhouses, human abattoirs, Rube Goldberg horrors with fine-toothed circular saws and tubes and buckets to catch heads and limbs, troughs and sluices for the

From the Teachers & Writers archives: students in Teachers & Writers Collaborative projects at P.S. 75 in New York City, circa early 1970's.

When I think of that table in the Teachers and Writers' room, that anarchic, long, white table with its piles of paper, and masses of pens, and screaming eleven-year-old boys heading out into the wilds of their imaginations, I think it was as close as I will ever in my life come to group artistic inspiration.

blood—it was amazing the latitude we were given. Jon Chapman was also good. He drew little musclemen soldiers and football players in great complexity; I think he was goaded on, inspired by the detail in Bornholdt's work. I went for comedy. My parents still own one of my comics, called (really) *The Adventures of Jurk Off.*

When I think of that table in the Teachers & Writers' room, that anarchic, long, white table with its piles of paper, and masses of pens, and screaming eleven-year-old boys heading out into the wilds of their imaginations, I think it was as close as I will ever in my life come to group artistic inspiration. In my mind we are like those geniuses of 1950s television—Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, Woody Allen, and Neil Simon (well, maybe not so much Neil Simon) writing for *Your Show of Shows*, as good as I'll ever have it when it comes to competitive artistic camaraderie—better than graduate MFA programs, because we were rooting for each other and because we were so merciless in our criticism.

I did not keep writing *The Adventures of Jurk Off*, and this was because (I think) my friends did not allow me to keep on putting out crap. It was not a table where we coddled each other. If you drew a superhero and his pecs looked like tits, you caught hell. "That shit is whack!" we would say.

In the T&W classroom at P.S. 75; making films.

Moving on from my early work, I went in for sharks, parodies of *Jaws*. Chris Alsop was writing serious *Jaws*, and I didn't think his work was any good. I was spurred to challenge him, so I made up a shark named Frankie, and Frankie was a hit, a fourth-grade laugh riot. He swam into stones, his nose crumpled, hilarity. That shit was the joint.

I don't remember Lopate exactly, but I do remember his presence hovering nearby—he was one of those tall, mustached, thin, Jewish guys that seemed everywhere in the middle seventies. My uncle was one of those guys. I saw a picture of Philip Roth from that period recently, and he was one of those guys too, awkward and lanky and to my mind oh so cool. Those were the guys you wanted to grow up to be, and you could tell that Mrs. Rosenfeld thought Lopate was cool, just by the way she said his name, "Phil Lopate," with the L's running together—it reminded me of the way we said the name of Franco Harris, the Pittsburgh Steelers' Super Bowl champion running back. Was it Frank O'Harris? Other names, too, ran together for me—did I distinguish between Teachers & Writers Collaborative and the Children's Television Workshop? I don't know. They were benign adult presences, hovering around us, urging us towards playful mayhem and knowledge.

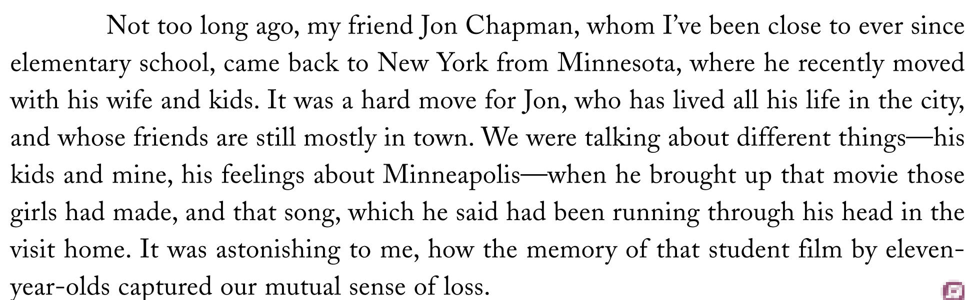
From our comics we ventured into Super 8 film. I remember ours vividly: It began in the Teachers & Writers room, with Dimitri Fane dressed as a mad scientist in a wild red wig, spinning the globe and setting forth dastardly plans. Then the scene changed to an airplane, flying through the sky, and in stop-frame animation it chugged past cotton-ball clouds and a construction paper sky. At the moment the villain's plot was unleashed, the plane dipped perilously, and inside the passenger cabin Ernesto Olivieri, Richie Gaskin, Jon Chapman, and I leaned from side to side wildly in our school chairs while the camera itself swayed. The next scene was after the crash—the five of us on a rock in Riverside Park, ready for action. And then an abrupt cut, Jared Barkan in a fedora, sunglasses, and a raincoat, was leaving an apartment building on Riverside Drive with a briefcase in his hand. The movie ended before the complexities of the plot could be resolved.

Ours was shown in a series of films, the first of which was made by some boys in Mr. Quinones' class. To create an elementary school inferno, they set the disco hit "Fire" to a montage of panic in P.S. 75—the principal's office, the cafeteria, all of them filmed with a match in front of the movie camera's lens. But it's the final film that sticks with me, made by some girls in Mr. Temple's class across the hall. It was about a girl who had to move away from New York, and in simple scenes in a playground and the

Phillip Lopate in the T&W classroom with students at P.S. 75.

girls' bathroom, she talked to her friends, while Carole King sang, "Doesn't anybody stay in one place anymore." I could not believe it when I saw that little, affecting movie. I saw what a story could be—not random explosions of excitement, but drama shaped around the actualities of life. I remember thinking, as if I'd been cheated, that no one had ever told me you could do that.

I could not believe it when I saw that little, affecting movie. I saw what a story could be—not random explosions of excitement, but drama shaped around the actualities of life. I remember thinking, as if I'd been cheated, that no one had ever told me you could do that.



Not too long ago, my friend Jon Chapman, whom I've been close to ever since elementary school, came back to New York from Minnesota, where he recently moved with his wife and kids. It was a hard move for Jon, who has lived all his life in the city, and whose friends are still mostly in town. We were talking about different things—his kids and mine, his feelings about Minneapolis—when he brought up that movie those girls had made, and that song, which he said had been running through his head in the visit home. It was astonishing to me, how the memory of that student film by eleven-year-olds captured our mutual sense of loss.

A student in the T&W classroom at P.S. 75, mid 70's.