

MEMORIES OF EDNA CONRAD

Being at that stage of life where it's possible to sit back, so to speak, and take stock of the turns of fortune of which a life is made, I realize that one of the great good fortunes of my life occurred on a day in the spring of 1959 when some professor at NYU sent me over to Elisabeth Irwin High School to be interviewed for a student teaching slot. That day I met Edna Conrad. The following September, I became part of her 7th grade class, and she became a part of my life.

I remember my first impression of her: a typical teacher of the sort endured in my Brooklyn childhood at P.S. 177, traditional, stern, and joyless. And I was not altogether wrong. Edna was traditional, conservative, one could say, in her structured and organized approach to learning, in her demands for effort and excellence, in her uncompromising standards. She could also be stern in the face of laxity. But joyless, ah — there I got it all wrong. If anything, Edna was full of joy. Joy in the pleasure and happiness she took from the good company of friends that filled her life, from achievement of her own and others, from the beauties of nature that for so many years would surround her every day, from life itself.

She was also, I soon came to see, a person of abiding optimism. It was her basic assumption that problems can be solved, that society can be made more just, and that she must do whatever she could towards that end. And beyond all these, she was a woman who retained a childlike curiosity, a sense of wonder — which accounted in part for what made her such an extraordinary teacher — that and her powerful faith in the potential and possibilities of children.

Edna became my friend that autumn of 1959. She attended my wedding at the semester's end, became friend to my husband and to our children, each in turn. We will, all of us, treasure her memory the rest of our lives. She was to my children the extended family which was so much a part of my own childhood but so sadly missing from theirs, not a relative but as good if not better than any grandaunt or cousin.

Her home in the country became the destination of scores of

family visits beginning when Jennifer was four in 1968, and ending when Freddy was 24 in 1991. How many times, in all seasons of the years inbetween did we pack up the car, head north across the Throggs Neck Bridge onto the New England Thruway, cross over in New Haven to 91 and from there go all the way up into beautiful Vermont, getting off the highway at Saxon's River, driving west past the stone houses of Chester, past rocky streams and covered bridges, past the mill town of Ludlow, and then turning at the Healdsville sign off 103 into the country road that went past the candle shop and the cheese factory and then up a little hill. The cows were always grazing in the pasture of the Flanders farm on the left, and on the right was Edna's house waiting for us. We'd turn into the driveway and there she'd be on the uppermost step — strong, hearty, welcoming. Every part of that journey is etched into our memories, each turn of the road, each vista of mountain and field and stream, as is every part of that dear house.

I know where everything belongs: the blue Bennington pottery salt and pepper shakers, the little juice glasses and the tall water glasses, the napkin holder, the cups hanging on their hooks, the dishes and bowls and dry dish towels — the order and arrangement of Edna's kitchen, as well as the green monogrammed towels in the bathroom, the antimacassars that covered the chairs, the marble-topped magazine-laden stool, the book and paintings, the little stove into which we fed the paper trash.



And it is with such a sense of loss to know I will never see it again.

The void, of course, is for myself as well as all the people who were part of Edna's life. How can one grieve for 98 years of healthy, purposeful, friend-filled life, of an independent old age spent in one's own home surrounded by the support and affection of true friends, of a memory that did not fade and a mind that functioned well enough to take on the subject of calculus at the age of 97, of an easy death? She wanted to live to be 100, and she should have. But her life was long and well-lived. The grief is not for her as it is for those who loved her, who miss her, who must get used to her not being here.

For me, it is as if a leg from a sturdy table has given way, and a solidity I counted on is no longer there. The last year or two she had come to remind me of my mother, who died in 1989. They were totally unlike in background, appearance, even personality so at first I was puzzled by the evocation. Then I came to understand -- both were totally unassuming women, artless, airless, pure in their judgements, fierce in their love. Edna somehow stood in for my mother those last times, an older woman in my life upon whose uncritical affection I could count. That is the solidity that has given way.

Edna opened up for us the beauties of Vermont. Returning year after year, it became more than a tourist destination, but a place known and loved. Through Edna, Ian, our younger son, discovered the nearby wilderness camp he attended for years and which continues to be part of his life. And in the strange ways that life works, what would be our final visit to Edna led to a new connection to this area, one that now takes the place of hers.

Last August, anxious for a change of scene after a hectic, schedule-filled summer, we impulsively decided to drive up to Vermont and see Edna. Our visits the last years lasted only hours, not days as they used to, but were treasured nonetheless. Freddy decided to come along. We sat on the deck in the warm afternoon, drank cranberry juice, enjoyed the view, talked. Edna was her usual animated self, full of stories, informed on all the latest events, opinionated, talkative. She was feeling better, and we drank to the expectation of attending her 100th birthday party.

The next day, we crossed over into New Hampshire on the way

back home. Freddy, who was searching for a reporter's job at the time, stopped off to inquire at a newspaper office we passed in West Lebanon. A few months later, he was hired by the Valley News. We waited to see how it would work out, and around Thanksgiving called Edna to tell her about our new link to New England.

Edna will never know that Freddy is living and working less than an hour away from Belmont. But we know it is because of her that he is. And we also know how much our lives were enriched by the friendship of this truly exceptional person whom we shall never forget.

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THEE AND THOU AT BROOKLYN FRIENDS

In September 1921 I entered Brooklyn Friends School in 7th grade at the tender age of 10-1/2. I remember Edna as the Quaker teacher of the 6th grade. I believe there was only one other Quaker on the staff and that was Marion Cocks, who had first grade. I believe she is still alive. Edna was still using "thee" and "thou" in her speech. She shared a room with the 5th grade whose teacher was Mrs. Fay Van Wagoner, who died a year or so ago in her mid-90's.

I believe Edna attended Friends Central in Philadelphia as a child. She started teaching at BFS in 1919 and left in 1945 because there was no pension plan in effect and she wanted to prepare for her future.

I left Friends in 1924, going over to Packer for four years, Adelphi College and then secretarial school. I joined the staff at Brooklyn Friends School in September 1931 as secretary to the new headmaster, Wayne L. Douglass, and the head of the High School, Warren B. Cochran, and the head of the Lower School, Miss May K. Gorham. After a year I was promoted to Financial Secretary and stayed