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Some Thoughts about Grace Paley

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Some Thoughts about Grace Paley

Judith Arcana

- ¹ *In the following lines, Judith Arcana, Paley's friend and biographer, evokes Paley's fortitude and firmness of purpose as she took part in the major protest movements of her time. It is from this passion for social justice and freedom that the author drew much of her energy and artistic inspiration.*¹

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- ² Grace Paley, who died in August of 2007, was one of the great masters of the short story form; she also wrote poems and essays that tell us, in her startlingly clear voice, things we need to know. A lifelong activist, she focused on anti-militarism, the conditions of women's lives, and urgent environmental issues.
- ³ Though Grace did not repeatedly confront the armed thugs of domestic terrorism in the USA, as Fannie Lou Hamer did, or as Susan Wicklund does now, she was a street activist all her life—beginning literally in childhood. She was tough and she was solid, saying the way to be of use on marches and at demonstrations is to “sit down and stay down.”
- ⁴ I don't think Grace made her decisions in relation to considerations of danger. She was both romantic and realistic, pragmatic and hopeful; she had (as in the title of one of her best-known stories) an “interest in life.” In her last decade, that interest remained so fierce she continued to undertake political action (and write a little, too) while using the various severe poisons of chemotherapy for her cancer. She was willing to take even experimental drugs because she wanted to live—to *be alive*. Pain was not an issue for Grace, nor was exhaustion—except in so far as they might, like little else, keep her from action.
- ⁵ If Grace were alive, she would tell you her life was one of privilege, even luxury, compared to the lives of most women in the world, in the USA, in her home states of New York and Vermont. Her part in the struggle for freedom and justice was consciously chosen, not forced upon her by unavoidable external conditions like, for

instance, the grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina. She chose to act from a position of privilege to resist oppression.

- 6 She took great pleasure from action in the streets; she did what she wanted to do, not what she thought she ought to do. She needed to be the way she was, having recognized from childhood the inequity she inherited. A Jew, she learned from parents who had fled Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, and from her own observations during the Great Depression, what life is like for most people. She understood by age fifteen that she would need to live against the current.
- 7 She was arrested many times and didn't mind going to jail. No doubt that attitude was at least partly rooted in the facts of the case: she hadn't the great likelihood of being raped and tortured and maybe murdered. That kind of experience was unlikely for a white middle class woman in the USA. Rather, she understood the symbolic political importance of being arrested, and she welcomed its educational value for herself.
- 8 She certainly understood she was putting herself in danger on some occasions (and she knew her children, who told me so, decades ago, were afraid for her). She understood there were situations in which she might be maimed or killed. Grace was no martyr; she did not seek danger. In the streets, sometimes the cops or soldiers were angry enough to be cruel and violent; sometimes physical danger was right up in her face (for example: read about the use of crowd-control horses in her stories and essays, and about her trip to VietNam with the peace movement for prisoner exchange).
- 9 Nevertheless, though she was indeed a principled citizen, she wasn't acting "on principle." Grace was for the actual, not the virtual; not for the ideal, but for the real. She said, "I don't think the thing for me has been civil disobedience so much as the importance of not asking permission." And, "non-violence does *not* mean personal safety. Pacifism is *not* passive-ism."
- 10 Grace Paley wanted and needed to make a statement; her two kinds of work, so often intertwined, are writing and political action. She used both her body and her words as signs, emblems, markers—words and action that would contradict the given, resisting acceptance of orthodoxy to seek truth along with justice. The conditions of her life called for, she believed, steady resistance to the sociopolitical machinery that granted her privilege by restraining and afflicting others. The moral compass she developed over the years of her life was set to the "north" of that understanding.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this article appeared in *On the Issues* in 2010.

AUTHORS

JUDITH ARCANA

Judith Arcana is the author of *Grace Paley's Life Stories: A Literary Biography*. Her most recent publications are *Soon To Be A Major Motion Picture* (fiction, 2015) and the forthcoming poetry collection *Here From Somewhere Else*. Other recent works are a set of three lyric broadsides, *The Water Portfolio* (2014); a fiction zine, *Keesha and Joanie and JANE* (2013); and a poetry chapbook, *The Parachute Jump Effect* (2012).