

Dear Edith

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January 14, 1920 – January 9, 2005

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Looking back, it feels as though Edith was waiting for me. But at the beginning it was the other way around. She arrived a few minutes late for our first meeting. It was during the 1986-87 winter, humid, cold, overcast Ann Arbor. Edith walked down the hall in the School of Social Work—she was 67 and already “retired” from the Psychology Department—wearing a quilted, insulated, full length overcoat. After her greeting at the door to her office, she produced an empty beer can from a coat pocket. “It’s worth 10 cents!” My suspicions evaporated. After five minutes’ conversation, I knew I wanted cookies, milk, and a nice story read to me. She was somebody else’s mother but maybe she would adopt me. Which, of course, she did. And an unlikely pairing it was: a self described Jewish girl from New York who was 26 and a graduate student at Yale when I started a life with roots in Irish Catholicism and later in the American West.

As she talked about her work with alcoholics, here was universal compassion. It was the light in her eyes, the tone in her voice, even with the Brooklyn accent. Edith taught compassion, not didactically, but by example. Her brother, a [former] heroin addict, had died in a VA hospital: “When he was sick and dying and no one would take him in, they did. People look down their noses at the VA but I’ve always liked it.” She published one of the first alcoholism prevalence studies in a VA patient sample.

We worked together in bringing an NIH funded alcohol research center to the University of Michigan and executed its research for a time, until the enterprise itself turned sour. Edith believed that alcoholism research, generally speaking, had taken too hard a turn towards biology and had lost much of its compassion. She was very bright—a college graduate at eighteen—and knew her way around statistics. But her own interests were in the human experiences of those she studied, such as heavy drinking women, a neglected group until she began to talk with them. Probability theory brought a measure of understanding, but a good interview brought much more. Once, at a national meeting, I heard her explain her views at a seminar for women scientists. I was there as a guest of a former clinical Fellow. The other speakers gave Edith the lip service they thought due a “pioneer” and then went straight to the central nervous system. “They’ve all missed the point,” my Fellow said. I agreed with her: compassion is easily ignored, perhaps because it is so difficult to harbor.

Edith was so selfless, so patient, that I don't think she saw her treatment at the seminar as anything other than an unfortunate turn of events that one day would turn back again when the promises of biological understanding revealed their limits in easing the suffering of alcoholism. It wasn't that she couldn't recognize human failings, she simply had a remarkably genuine capacity to bear them. When one of the figures at Michigan lifted Edith's research methodology wholesale without so much as an acknowledgement, let alone a thank you, she simply bore it. She could sometimes carry this to a fault, as when she added her name to a colleague's counting of angels on pinheads in a 1986 criticism of somebody else's data. The proof is in the pudding: the clinically apt original work is in its second edition while the critique's approach has yet to locate the bounds of practicality.

The alcohol research center began falling apart in late 1990. It was to lose about 40% of its NIH funding in 1993 at the first competitive renewal, and then all of it at the second. Dean Krahn, the brightest and most accomplished of Edith's adoptees, left for the University of Wisconsin in 1991. By the next year the center's home department was reputedly in deficit and the medical school had taken over its finances. I moved our family to Colorado in 1992, the senior-most of about twenty faculty who left in that era. At the farewell party, I met Henry Gomberg, Edith's beloved husband and an eminent physicist. Edith smiled at me with a bigger than usual grin when she introduced him. "He discovered a sub-atomic particle. Guess what he called it." Henry looked at the floor and then at me, a little sheepishly. "The Penetron!" Edith chortled, with an even larger grin. Now really, Mother.

Henry died in 1995. About 1997 or '98 Edith came to mind, as she often does, this time because I hadn't given her a proper explanation of why I had left her home. I put it in mostly hexameter English verse and included a couple of my own nightmares recorded during the stay at Michigan.

Edith In Ann Arbor ©

"Where will it end?" she asked me one time, years ago,
Before it ended there and began somewhere else.
Indecency was an abstraction to be borne,
Not fought with. She was older, more adept
At life than I, and watching her was watching
Changelessness in the lunar face through dark and light.
Until one night the swinging corpse of a child in a closet
Woke me and the floating corpse of the same still child
Woke me again, killing the last indecency.
She bore it to an end. I fought it to a draw.
An ending and an endlessness was all we saw.

Many years before, she had taken up residence in my heart. And I used an English version of Japanese haiku to describe her there, even in Colorado.

Edith Out West ©

1.

Three magpies picking
Over the prairie dog on the road;
Indoors, she is reading.

2.

The kindness shown her
Brother radiates: the setting sun traveling
Up and down the Front Range.

3.

Can you smell
Sage and hear the night foxes and
See the yucca flowering?

4.

How long has Henry been
Gone? The blue dots light
The lunar path.

5.

The flashing wink
Of light green aspen leaves rattling
The afternoon.

I was astounded when she wrote back to say that she thought the poems were beautiful. She seemed to be waiting for me to see what she saw. That life, even with all its horrid nightmares and carcasses on the road, is beautiful. That compassion, our human ability to share the emotions of others, painful and joyous both, unlocks that great beauty. And like Saul of Tarsus, that other Jewish genius, she saw that the patience to bear compassion comes from love. Edith waits in my heart. I do the best I can.

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