

Helena E Sprague – eulogy
July 24, 04
“Helena: A Teacher in All Spheres”

It is an honor and a joy to preside over the ‘**Memorial Service Celebration**’ of Helena’s earthly Life. She was a good friend and I admired, respected, and cherished her. The week that she was ill, I was in Spain attending the Parliament of World Religions. Several times I spoke about my story and connection to the Urantia Book, a passion that Helena and I shared. She was in Spain, too, in Spirit. Each time I told my story I spoke about Helena– for she was the first person that I spoke with after receiving the book. I was living in Maine. Helena was encouraging by her phone calls and then she graciously invited me to visit at the house in Winnepesaukee, N.H. There I Helena and Sidney graciously welcomed me. Indirectly, I believe that she was one of the influences, which brought me to Connecticut; when I next relocated for my ministry. Thank you Sidney, and the rest of the family, for this privilege of sharing in Helena’s celebration. It has been a joy working with and becoming acquainted with you all.

My primary image of Helena that is consistent throughout her life both professionally, and in her mannerisms is “One of Being a Teacher”. Besides her professional career as a teacher in Darien and New Britain, I think of the groups that she was associated with; The Urantia Movement, and most recently her devotion to the “Seekers” discussion group here at Avery Heights; they all involved sharing and teaching. She never stopped being interested and learning about life; reading the NY Times and watching the News on PBS –and as recently as two weeks prior to her departure from this world. She believed in keeping her mind sharp and active.

Helena had many roles and relationships in her life; Daughter, Mother, Wife, Grandmother, Great Grandmother, and I would add Teacher. I understood Helena to be a woman of grace – always dressed well, commitment, intelligence, humor- dry I can remember her laugh at the ironies of this world; determination, endurance and common sense – which I believed made it possible to withstand hardships and conflict, and a genuine curiosity and commitment to God and the future of human society. I think that she wanted the very best for the world especially for children. As her daughter Nancy, remarked, she was a head of her time in concerns for women in the world-place and her emphasis upon sound progressive views on education and family.

I can hear Helena’s voice saying; “Family always comes first”. When I asked what story illustrated Helena as a mother – I learned about “Tiger’s

Milk”. It was a mixture of brewer’s yeast in milk sweetened with Frozen Hawaiian Punch for the children; but only Molasses for herself. Her love for her family was shown by her watchful care over diet and nutrition. I also learned about Wheat Germ brownies and a traditional German Cookie that requires 3 weeks of preparation and love involving stirring with a stone paddle. I also heard more stories about family gatherings and an early “Thanksgiving Meal over Labor Day Weekend” in the get away home of Winnepesaukee home in New Hampshire.

The Role of Wife is the one I have observed directly. Helena and Sidney shared a love and a respectful commitment to each other that was admirable. Sidney describes how compatible they were in having similar interests and values. They both value saving and recycling – Helena her plastic bags /containers and Sidney his cardboard boxes. More enjoyable was the time spent going to the Hartford Stage, Listening to Classical Music, Canoeing around Sleepers Island or walking/exploring all the state parks in CT and beyond. The beauty of being outdoors, watching the birds eat at the feeders, and her green thumb are well known by her family. Helena enjoyed life. She sought after truth, beauty, and goodness.

Helena spoke to the “Ladies Tea” at Avery Heights on April 29th, 2004. She wrote an autobiographical story about the first half of her life. This clearly reflects the values, education, and family influences that shaped her life in the direction of education. I have chosen some of the “nuggets” from her story that illustrate this consistent theme. Helena’s writings are clear, interesting, detailed, and reflective. She wrote her own eulogy – there are no better words to share with you.

Helena describes her mother as being one to spoil her as an only child but also had the quick reaction of an “Irish Gal”. “She had clear goals; education was high priority. Helena was free to peruse any book in the house of which there were hundreds. “What stayed with me was respect for my curiosity, diversity of topics and willing answers to questions. Not quite three, I started at a small private “progressive education” school run by Stanwood Cobb a then well known researcher and author in early childhood education”.

One of Helena’s favorite people was her maternal grandfather. “My mother’s father, Grandpa, was the son of a Methodist minister, attended Worcester College in Ohio; his gifts were literary in both English and Spanish. He worked for some years in the State Department, later became a foreign correspondent for the Washington Times.

All my school years except two were spent in private schools, financed by Grandpa, mother's father, bless him. As he made his home with us when he was not traveling abroad, he and I got to know each other well. In many ways, he was the trunk of my childhood tree and steadied me, when my mother divorced and later remarried.

My college years in Ithaca were like a film script: scares, courses, searching, dates, friends, struggles, glee club concert, two honors, and getting engaged. Like many of my classmates, I graduated on a June Monday and was married the following Saturday in the campus chapel.

Then came the blessing and birth of three children. One story that I heard Helena tell, which is also in her "Ladies Tea" Reader's Digest Version of her Life --is about traveling cross country.

"Later, our kids wanted to see "our Country". With best wishes of their father, who could not take time from business, Mom and three teenagers undertook the grand tour. The oldest, Alec, and I alternated driving every hundred miles; the second Lew, was photographer, and the youngest Nancy, was treasurer. We drove from CT to Tijuana to Montana, to L. A."

I see this example of teaching by experiential learning and doing. What a wonderful way to learn about history, geography, and family living by spending a summer driving across the USA.

Travel broadens a person's horizons. Helena was able to travel extensively during her life. I have chosen to use her words once more, "Among my later travels were a six week's tours of Europe, part of course work for my Masters in Education at Columbia' two visits to Scandinavia, and ten days in the Holy Land. The last was extraordinary: the fellow tour members were all readers of The Urantia Book, and the tour guide was an assistant professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. You can understand why I have a long list of thanksgivings."

Teaching Career Formally

Helena started her formal career in education by taking just two courses of study when her children were teenagers. That was the start of 20 years as a teacher and department head in Home Economics, later called Family Living, first in Darien and Later in New Britain. I remember first meeting, Helena and we were getting acquainted, that she described her career as one of "A Family Living Teacher". I had to ask what she meant. I don't think

that Helena was being vague intentionally – but rather that she saw the purpose and value in Education of Home economics as more than teaching skills; it was a teaching of how to live and how to be a good person in relationship with others most especially the Family.

All wise teachers are constantly students and continue to learn. Helena learned from her own students. The story that I remember most vividly from her she recorded in her “Ladies Tea Memories”. “On the last day of the school year in New Britian , dozens of mothers [students], sometimes fathers, paraded their offspring in the halls, one boy came to my office with a beautiful black toddler: ‘Teach, I wanted you to meet my kid.’ He explained that this was the most recent of four, all by different mothers.”

Faith Search

In my conversations with Helena there was one author who came up frequently, a British Historian, named Arnold Toynbee, who authored a 10 book series one of which was “An Historian’s Approach to Religion”.

Helena learned and (wanted to pass on) his three primary principles.

[A. -In all religions, seek to distinguish between the essentials and nonessentials.

B. Search for and emphasize the commonalities of all faiths.

C. Transcend self-centeredness.]

These principles are worthwhile today and were in living experience at the Parliament of World Religions. Helena was never content with the status quo she wanted to see improvements and to teach and assist in the forwarding evolution of society.

I hope that she is pleased, as she watches from above, to see that I end with her words of wisdom passed on once again. Helena was a teacher – to the end; and I suspect that God may still have more work for her to do on the other side. Good bye Helena, faithful, and loving friend, go in peace, and to be about your Father’s business – may your eternal career be filled with more blessings and opportunities for both learning and instructing.