

Betty Peck— Living a Life of Gratitude

Anne Veh

Betty Peck has often been referred to as a fairy godmother, a kindergarten teacher from the gods, Mother Earth, the gratitude lady, a loving mother, a devoted wife, a beloved grandmother, and a friend to all. At 92, one still feels her radiance, beauty, and grace. On a recent visit with Betty, sitting at a small table in her kitchen, I was caught unprepared. Her silver hair, pulled back into a soft bun, frames her wise and beautifully aged face, and her loving eyes hold it all, an understanding that pierced straight through me.

“So dear, tell me more about yourself.” Words were not necessary. Her hands held mine with a warmth and gentleness that communicated it all. The few words I shared were enough. “My dear, you understand.”

To the thousands of children who have had the good fortune to have Betty Peck as a kindergarten teacher—and I have been one of them—she is a fairy godmother. Betty refers to Kindergarten with a capital “K” and as a Kindergarten teacher, she was light years ahead of her time. She taught in tune with the rhythms of nature and with an understanding of the vital place that music, beauty and play hold in a child’s life.

There were three events in Betty’s early life that account for her early wakefulness and feelings of connection to all life. The eldest of six children, she was born on Edgewood Avenue in San Francisco and, when she was very young, moved



to Southgate, an area in Los Angeles. She recalls with utmost admiration her kindergarten teacher there. When Betty’s baby sister was born, the family invited her teacher and her classmates to come and meet the baby.

Betty recalls, “Here was my mother, my father, my baby, my kindergarten teacher, my kindergarten friends. The world was mine. It gave me such joy!” The second of these events was learning to read in first grade. “I ran home as fast as I could to read to my mother. She had me bring a chair close to the window and we sat down and I read every single word from my little book. At the end my mother said, now read it backwards. She didn’t believe I had truly learned to read. So I read it backwards with more joy than I read it the other way. And at that moment, I became my true self!”

During the Depression, her father encouraged the family to



move to their farm in Modesto. On arriving, Betty's mother found the farmhouse too small for herself and the children. She asked the men to bring the hay wagons up. As she described that first night, "Here we were on this wonderful alfalfa hay under this black, night sky. The meteors were exploding across the sky. It was at this moment, that I became one with the Universe."

One cannot speak of Betty without her husband of 60 years, Willys Peck, a local historian and former journalist. When Willys first asked Betty to marry him, she had carefully prepared a list of the qualities she wanted in a husband. Near the top was that he must have a house. One day, while Betty was at work, she received a telegram from Willys. It said, "Have house. Will you marry me?" She sent a telegram in reply, "Yes!" Their relationship is best described by their daughter, Anna, who says "Betty has the ideas and Willys manifests them." They adore each other and humor and reverence are always present.

It Was, and Still Is, Magic

Their home and garden of over 60 years is a magical realm. The house sits close to the street, although you would never know once you enter the garden. As a child of six in Mrs. Peck's kindergarten class, I first visited their garden for an end-of-year kindergarten family picnic. Imagine, thirty children and their families frolicking in a sun-dappled garden of old oaks and ancient redwood trees with nooks and crannies for a fairy garden, a reading playhouse and garden angels scattered about. Today, the garden is unchanged. Beautifully hand-painted signs are placed throughout. One reads, "The Garden is the Source of All Life, and Basis of All Art."

A Shakespearian scholar, Willys was inspired to build an outdoor amphitheater ("Theatre on the Ground") with the stage overlooking the Saratoga creek for family and community productions. In his youth, Willys performed with Olivia DeHaviland (a former Oak Street schoolmate). For many years, their

daughter Anna's Waldorf classes would perform their annual plays there. Mindful of the neighbors, Willys also added the Great Hall, an indoor performance room that holds many worldly treasures and gifts, including a handmade Native American drum, Asian robes, prayer flags for peace and a grand piano. An avid railway enthusiast, over 50 years ago Willys built a little red train, modeled after the C. P. Huntington of the Pacific Railroad, which still circles the home today. In a quaint corner of the garden resides the Maypole, which is decorated each May Day. And beyond the garden is an enchanting creek where we caught tadpoles and played in the stream as children. It was and still is magic!

Kindergarten Warrior

"Kindergarten. That's where it all begins!" states Betty emphatically when she meets new people. There's deep wisdom in this statement. Betty has been teaching kindergarten in the Saratoga School District since the early 1950s. She was offered her first teaching job right out of college (San Jose State). She initially taught a third grade class of over 50 children in nearby Los Gatos at the University Avenue School. And just last year, Betty's first class celebrated a grand reunion in which seventeen of her students, now in their 70s, came with their children and grandchildren in tow. Letters of appreciation from her students fill books and Betty still refers to them with great fondness. She recalled reading *Wind in the Willows* to her students down by the creek. "It was a time when there were no divorces and parents were very involved with their children."

As a kindergarten teacher, Betty shares, "The teacher has to bring herself, has to know that she is the most magnificent being in the world, and she has this gift of love to give to the children. That's what it is all about."

She first taught kindergarten at Foothill School in Saratoga where she soon felt the constraints of the administration and district standards. "I can't teach kindergarten without a garden," she explained. When her request was denied, she took the children out into the high weeds to gather seeds and taught the children how to bake bread. When men arrived to cut the grass and spray insecticide, she stood blocking them. Eventually, after several of these showdowns, they relented.

What I most recall from my days at Foothill School

One day, the principal came to the classroom to share new reading kits.

Betty's response was, "No, I am the reading kit." When the principal said, "You can't have those logs in the play garden, they're too dangerous." Betty replied, "I stand for danger."

was Betty's soft voice, loving nature and her songs. She went to great lengths to make us feel life's magic. For instance, she brought a full-length mirror into the kindergarten room, placing it inside a closet on the back of the door. Painted in beautiful script around the door were these words, *Thank you for all the magic moments that make it possible for me to stand here and feel how truly wonderful I AM.* When a child was feeling low, she would bring the child to the mirror and stand with her hand on the child's shoulder and say, "How could you forget how wonderful you are!" Betty has a tall mirror in her garden, too.

Planting the Seeds

To share her beliefs and to offer them as a gift to parents and teachers, Betty wrote a Kindergarten Creed: *I bring the gift of myself to this celebration of life we call the kindergarten. I come each day to be refined, smoothed, and tempered, for I hold in my hands with wonder and gratitude the future. The seeds of the future are in the oneness of all nature, all people in tune with the divine to be found in our hearts that I give through the joy and beauty of love.*

"It's what the Kindergarten teacher does, she plants



the seeds,” she explains. “We give from the joy and wonder that come from our hearts where we have those special feelings of connectedness, whether you call it the Divine, or the Universe. Children want to belong and they love diversity. You can’t have oneness without diversity and diversity without oneness.”

Deeply inspired by the great educator, Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), Betty wove his sensory-rich and creative practices into her teachings. Froebel invented kindergarten, his “garden of children,” and championed the care of the child in the earliest years, creating a

curriculum of singing, dancing and gardening. He also introduced the first play materials, referred to as “the gifts”—balls, wooden blocks, tiles and sticks to demonstrate that children learn by playing.

Well, Imagine!

In the early 1970s, Marv Steinberg, a principal of nearby Oak Street Elementary School (where Willy Peck attended as a child) approached Betty to start a kindergarten. Betty said, “I won’t come unless my door opens into a garden and I have a built-in oven for baking bread.” He replied, “You may have anything you want. I love your philosophy and everything you do. I want you to do it all right here in my school.”

“What an endorsement! It was so exciting. Well, imagine! I wish every teacher could be told this, that they could do what they felt was right.” At Oak Street School, Betty organized her kindergarten room around the four corners of the Earth. There was a place for the sun, the moon, the garden, and the kitchen. Connecting the children to nature was accomplished in every way. Dressed in a traditional dirndl (a white blouse belted with a full shirt), Betty had several dresses fashioned for each season.

She taught science with an indoor garden, to reflect what was happening outside. And on the back wall of the room was a beautifully painted tree. The children would attend to the tree, depending on the season, adding fall leaves or spring blossoms, and every Thursday was garden day. The child who worked the hardest would be granted a crown to be king or queen of ecology for the day. And the crowned child would have the honor of passing pieces of fresh-baked bread to everyone.

Her classroom also had a “Cinderella” rug which held the “Mother’s Lap,” a comfy large chair where Betty would sit and tell stories, the children all seated around her in a “moon boat” or crescent shape. And many of the children would dress up in silks and colored cloth for story time. There was a natural rhythm and routine to each day. And at the beginning and at the end, the children would be greeted or sent off with a hug while Betty sang good morning or good-bye songs.

I Stand for Danger

What Anna, Betty’s daughter, recalls most dearly are powerful moments when her mother revealed her courageous nature. One day, the principal (described

by Betty as the Prince or Princess) came to the classroom to share new reading kits. Betty's response was, "No, I am the reading kit." When the Principal said, "You can't have those logs in the play garden, they're too dangerous." Betty replied, "I stand for danger."

Betty's confidence and continual research was an endless source of strength. She understood the context for teaching. "I was so privileged to know what was truly right for the child and what it was all about by the way I had gathered it myself from every corner of the world." Betty also felt that what the kindergarten teacher could bring was of essential importance for the parents and the administration as well.

Betty Peck is also revered as a mentor whose passion for inspiring young teachers extended to her Kindergarten Forums, which she holds in her home four times a year. She is known widely as an innovator and is highly respected in the Waldorf education community. Betty has published two books, *Kindergarten Education: Freeing Children's Creative Potential* (published by Hawthorn Press) and a novel, *A Kindergarten Teacher Looks at the Word GOD: Reflections on Goodness, Oneness and Diversity* (published by the Rudolf Steiner College Press). She has two additional books in manuscript form, "Changing All the No's to Yes's and All the Negatives to Positives" and "How to Set Up a Kindergarten Classroom."

From Kindergartens to Gardens

Betty's gifts extend beyond the education community. In 1972, she and a group of active citizens invited the late visionary master gardener and horticulturist Alan Chadwick to come to Saratoga and start a community garden. Betty was introduced to Alan Chadwick's work through her daughter, Anna, who was attending UC Santa Cruz at the same time Alan Chadwick was hired to start a student garden and training program. Thanks to their combined efforts, the



Saratoga Community Garden was established on 10 acres of land, envisioned by Betty and designed by Alan Chadwick. It served as a demonstration garden for children and adults until 1987, when

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the land was developed into a retirement community. While it was there, over 6,000 children visited the garden each year. It was maintained by Chadwick’s apprentices, and today many of these apprentices are building an archive of Alan Chadwick’s work and lectures to be offered to the public as a gift.

Reconnection

As I enter my own 50th year, it is with nostalgia and reverie that I recall these happy days of kindergarten. How I came to reconnect with Betty Peck more than 40 years later feels like a miracle.

It began with an email exchange in early May. Betty’s daughter, Anna Rainville, sent a note in appreciation of servicespace.org and especially

for a recent feature on dailygood.org that shared a commencement address at the University of Pennsylvania by one of ServiceSpace’s founders, Nipun Mehta. Anna, a teacher and educator in Waldorf education, was so touched by Nipun’s address that she sent it to all her students and the families of her students. In Anna’s note, she shared that she knew a very special person 92 years of age, who has lived the life of service embodied in the values of ServiceSpace, and she invited a group to come down for tea.

That special person happened to be her mother. Nipun forwarded the email to a group of ServiceSpace coordinators with the invitation. As luck would have it, I was on the email thread and immediately realized that Betty Peck was, in fact, my own much-loved kindergarten teacher! A few weeks later, several of us from ServiceSpace traveled to Saratoga for tea with Betty and her family and friends for a lovely lunch and salon under the old oak trees in the Peck’s magical garden.

Every Thursday for many years, the Pecks have opened their home and garden to weekly salons. The topics vary, although the theme remains constant, “cultural change through conversation.” On this Thursday in May, we were fortunate to have a special guest from India joining us, Jayesh Patel, the founder of the NGO Manav Sadna, operating on Gandhian values and promoting health and sanitation for the vast slums of Ahmedabad. He, too, is a warm and loving teacher and shared his work and offered gifts from the impoverished children of Ahmedabad with Betty.

At the end of our lunch, Jayesh asked Betty and Willys if they would be open to receiving a traditional Indian Blessing of the Elders. It was a sacred moment to witness Jayesh and other ServiceSpace friends offer a blessing by kissing the feet of these elders. Betty, Willys and their friend Jackie all received the blessing, and Jayesh and others were blessed back by the loving hands of Betty, Willys and Jackie. Together, we experienced Goodness, Oneness and Diversity, Betty’s three principles (which spell GOD).

Betty reminds us, “Sunshine is always accompanied by shadow and the dark times make you stronger. Stay deep-rooted and strong like the Redwood. Make other people feel important. Count your Blessings.”

For many years, at the end of each day, Betty and Willys walk around the home and garden and sit on a rocking bench overlooking the creek. There, they count their blessings. ♦