
Transitions—In Memoriam

In Memory of Betty Peck, 1921 – 2022

~ Anna Rainville



Betty Peck, beloved kindergarten teacher in public and Waldorf school communities, crossed the threshold into the spiritual world at the age of 100. After years of public school teaching, she encountered the ideas of Rudolf Steiner and Waldorf education through biodynamic gardening. She brought these inspiring ideas with energy, endless creativity, conviction and joy to countless children, families, and Waldorf teachers. Gateways joins in the celebration of her long life with gratitude for the inspiration she endlessly shared with all who love and work with young children. Following are remembrances of Betty by her daughter, Anna Peck Rainville.

Betty Ruth Wesson Peck, December 18, 1921–June 18, 2022

When my mother was twelve years old, her family moved from the city lights of Los Angeles to a ranch in California's Central Valley. The story goes that when they arrived, my mother's mother took one look at how small the farmhouse was and called for a hay wagon to be brought where her six children would sleep outside until the house could be significantly enlarged.

From the top of that hay wagon, my mother saw the night sky for the first time. She always told us that it was then she was "caught up in the Milky Way and became one with the universe."

If there is one experience that defines my mother and her deep connection with the mystery and beauty of life, that is it. She carried that wonder and sense of beauty during every year of her long and purposeful life.

She loved stars. In her classroom, the golden alphabet letters were gifts from the stars, she traced around her kindergarten children to show them that they, too, were five-pointed stars, and she was particularly fond of the North Star, making sure that there was one shining high in the north section of her kindergarten classroom for 30 years.

After retiring there was a North Star in our home library, her bedroom, and then in her room at the nursing home where she lived the final four years. Whenever I left her to work with kindergarten teachers, she would call out, "Remember to tell them about the North Star."

She had a strong inner compass. She was constantly on her way. Her everyday was a journey and adventure. She took every opportunity to learn and to celebrate. I remember a goodbye party for the majestic oak tree when it died. Before it was removed from our garden, she invited the county historian to tell everyone what the tree had witnessed during in its 200-year lifetime. And she invited a Native American drummer to drum and sing farewell.

Every year my brother and I knew important holidays would be wondrously celebrated including a Halloween spook house with a resident (real) skeleton and coffin and then on the first day of May early morning dancing with friends and neighbors around the May Pole with fiddles and strawberry shortcake. Newly married, my mother started a beloved caroling

tradition with my father's friends who had sung together in the UC Berkeley Cal Glee Club. To this day on the Saturday before Christmas four generations gather to sing in four-part harmony to our elders, shelters, and nursing homes.

To be a teacher was my mother's true calling. For her, teaching children was the way to celebrate life. She began teaching third grade in Los Gatos after graduating from the San Jose Normal School (now SJSU). Next, as a supervising teacher for the county, she discovered a special love for the young child and parent education.

My brother and I spent our earliest school days on a farm in a unique educational program founded by our mother, who wanted all children and their families to experience the lifelong benefits of playing and exploring in the natural world. Parents took notes on their child at play and attended monthly meetings on child development. We remember walking through corn rows, catching sunbeams in the barn's loft, and playing in the farmyard on a retired tractor. The highlight was a cargo net hung from the mighty oaks. She had somehow procured this treasure from the San Francisco docks, and we loved climbing. So did the parents. Her granddaughters, Sarah and Merina, were fortunate to attend this school which is now in a new mountain location where it continues to thrive as the Los Gatos Saratoga Observation Nursery School.

My mother's years as a kindergarten teacher widened, polished, and deepened her creative spirit and sense of celebration. In her first years, she welcomed 25 children in the morning and another 25 for the afternoon session—without an assistant. Even then, her sense of style and appreciation for her educational roots and inspiration showed in the way she dressed: Italian leather shoes in honor of Maria Montessori, colorful skirt and black velvet bodice as in a German dirndl for Frederick Froebel, and antique lace white blouses from my father's aunts who were all teachers. Later she wore beautiful Afghan walking dresses in the seasonal colors. She had exquisite taste, dressing for drama, comfort, and mystique—her closet was filled with handmade, antique, re-purposed, and ethnic treasures.



She was a true believer in the power of play, especially outdoors, such as in the prune orchard and field of tall grasses behind the classroom. Each time the sprayer rolled through, my mother described how she had to throw herself in front of the tractor to stop the poison. Finally, she drove over the mountain to the University of California in Santa Cruz where she was a long-time admirer of the remarkable garden project founded by Alan Chadwick. In her matter-of-fact way, she invited Alan to start a garden for her kindergarten. Amazingly, he said, yes. And he told her that, of course, it would be biodynamic. So began her introduction to Rudolf Steiner. The garden turned into a ten-acre demonstration garden bursting with flowers, vegetables, apprentices, master gardeners, and children. My mother declared she wouldn't be caught inside on a Monday morning, so off they went each Monday to spend the day in the garden. It flourished for 14 years until the land had to be sold.

Meanwhile, the garden led her to Steiner's other works and ultimately to Waldorf education, where she met kindred spirits, especially Margret Meyerkort, a lifelong friend. The ideas found a home in her public school kindergarten where they delighted the children and their families and confounded the administration. She called the principal "Prince" or

“Princess” accordingly. One day the Prince came in with the latest packaged language arts program. “No!” my mother said, “I am my reading kit.” Another year, the Princess demanded that the stumps in her play garden be removed because they were too dangerous. “No!” my mother said, “I stand for danger.”

She believed passionately in what it means to be a teacher—the responsibility, deep learning, and joy. She wrote a creed to express this passion and mailed it off to educational and political leaders, including several presidents. She was invited to design a new kindergarten room and program allowing her to develop her ideas further, all of which are refreshingly shared in her book, *Kindergarten Education*. During this time she held weekly parent evenings in her home and began the quarterly Kindergarten Forum where educators and parents gathered to discuss topics at the heart of early childhood education.

When she retired from teaching kindergarten, she journeyed onward to become a grandmother, a doctoral student, and an author. She hosted a weekly salon, whose motto was “cultural change through conversation.”

With our father, she found a loving partner to match her enthusiasm. Together they created a magical realm where family and community were welcomed to celebrate life and death and everything in between.

There was a quiet rhythm to her otherwise public life. Reading the paper in the morning, the pleasure of preparing very healthy meals (we were raised on Adele Davis, raw milk, and whole grains) and setting the table, tending to the ever-changing garden, afternoon tea, and reading in bed. She read with a pencil underlining passages, noting some with N.B., jotting page numbers and reminders inside the back cover for her own index. She would often call me up to say, “Listen to this!” and read to me from her latest favorite—always non-fiction.

She loved poetry. Every time she took me to the airport, she would stand and wave goodbye while boldly reciting lines from “Old Ironsides,” a poem she had memorized in eighth grade: “Give her to the god of storms, the lightning and the gale.”

And on the return, she would always bring to me a rose from the garden. But there was one time when she was so much in a hurry she didn’t have time to pick the rose. She arrived and said, “I am the rose!”

I remember when my father opened a fortune cookie and when I asked what it said, he replied, “It says I am going to die.” He handed it to me, and I read the words, “You will go on a great adventure.”

But for my mother, life was the adventure. It was a celebration. Her favorite Bible verse was John 10:10, “I have come to give you life and life more abundantly.”

She truly loved life in its fullness, taking challenges as an invitation to reconsider, realign and reinvent.

She surrounded herself with beauty. During her monthly doctoral classes in Oakland, she filled the car with baskets of shining orange persimmons, branches of spring blossoms, garden bouquets, and colorful cloths. Arriving early, she would set up the room, transforming it into something marvelous and inviting. “I can’t learn, otherwise,” she’d say.

She also lived in gratitude. As part of the kindergarten birthday celebration whenever someone said, “Thank you,” the adults in the room rang little, tiny bells. On other occasions when a child spontaneously said “Thank you” for a kindness, my mother would say, “I can hear the chimes ring.” With my father she walked around the garden three times before tea and sat on the bench overlooking the creek to count their blessings. They are still counting as they sit on the blessing bench, commemorated in bronze, in the Saratoga town plaza, ever grateful.

The colorful banner welcoming everyone to the celebration of her life captured her lifelong sense of connection to the universe: “Betty Peck: Stardust to Stardust.”

I wish you could have met her. She was extraordinary. Please find more stories in the following article and film by one of her former kindergarten children. ♦

<https://www.conversations.org/story.php?sid=333> or

<https://www.conversations.org/story.php?sid=333&op=pdf>

<https://www.karmatube.org/videos.php?id=8167>