What Our Fear of the Enemy Does to Us *by* Leonard Bernstein

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Remembering Grace Paley and her wise, fierce, funny, sad, innovative short stories

Roberta Silman

I can still remember, all these years later, the shiver of pleasure that ran through me when at the end of the 1950s I first read Grace Paley's early stories. Hers was a voice so raucous, so appealing, that I felt as if someone had grabbed me by the lapels of my very proper Peck & Peck jacket and was shouting at me to revise my view of the world. Young as I was, I knew that if I had any thoughts about becoming a writer, I had to listen. I never dreamed that I would one day sit in Grace Paley's office at Sarah Lawrence and that we would become friends with that special relationship of graduate student to teacher.

In recent years, and especially since her death in August 2007, Grace has been described as a protester, a troublemaker, a superb teacher and editor, a rebel, "a combative pacifist" (her own phrase), a feminist, and even "the sagacious elf of American letters" (A. M. Homes in her 1998 interview with Grace on Salon.com). Paley was all those things, depending on how you knew her and in what context, but most important, she was a writer of great originality who changed the face of the American short story. Not merely the nose or the eyes or even the peripheral ears, but the whole face. And she has been imitated so often and sometimes so badly that we have forgotten how innovative she really was.

When she began writing in the early 1950s, the great tradition of the American short story included some women who were primarily novelists: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and Sarah Orne Jewett had written terrific stories. Later there were Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor, and Eudora Welty, primarily story writers, who, unlike Grace, tried their hand at longer works. Then there were the men: Stephen Crane, Sherwood Anderson, Henry James, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald, and Grace's contemporaries—Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Delmore Schwartz, I. B. Singer, John Cheever, Donald Barthelme, Irwin Shaw, Herbert Gold, Philip Roth, John Updike. Roth's only story collection, *Goodbye, Columbus,* appeared in 1959, the year that Paley's *The Little Disturbances of Man* was published. One can understand why the Establishment chose Roth's book over hers to win the National Book Award in 1960. As good as his stories are and as willing as Roth was to confront every theme that would turn up in his later work, they seem tame, almost traditional, compared to Grace's loosely constructed, insistently wild stories that revealed in language and syntax how powerfully women yearned for sex and freedom. Critics who read her first collection were too startled and puzzled to award her anything like a prize, and *Little Disturbances* "fell into a

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well," she would say with a wry smile.

Her women forebears had certainly written about women's lives, and although their tales were sometimes shocking, as at the end of Wharton's "Roman Fever," or deeply suggestive as in Porter's "Flowering Judas," or even wistfully sexy, as in Cather's "Coming, Aphrodite!" they stayed within certain boundaries. What they had to say about sexual feelings was largely masked, polite, implied, and it is interesting to note that when Wharton wrote about her feelings of entrapment in her own marriage, she chose to tell it through the story of a man, Ethan Frome.

Then along comes Grace Paley, who is utterly outspoken and outrageous, revealing the innermost thoughts and hurts of Rosie Lieber, Virginia and Mrs. Raftery, and Faith Darwin—characters who will appear again and again, especially her alter ego, Faith—in language that had all the bumpy, funny qualities of spoken conversation, where logic simply doesn't have a place.

Although many of her male contemporaries had the same Eastern European Jewish ancestors as Grace did, and although they knew Yiddish and used it in their work, only I. B. Singer, who wrote in Yiddish and oversaw the translations of his work, could reproduce the strange, often inverted logic of that language and culture in English. But Grace, writing soon after World War II, somehow managed to capture it in her native tongue and to create a world in lower New York as alive, as memorable, as Singer's Frampol.

And she was content to do it in the shortest form available to her—the short story, and the *short* short story. For she had different goals from the men, who, she once told me with a laugh, "had big ideas and wanted to write long epic works." Her favorite example of that was the unforgettable first paragraph of Saul Bellow's *Adventures of Augie March:*

> I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent. But a man's character is his fate, says Heraclitus, and in the end there isn't any way to disguise the nature of the knocks by acoustical work on the door or gloving the knuckles.

Unlike Bellow and the rest of them, Grace wanted to write about what she called "everyday life" as it was lived by "ordinary people, mostly women," much as her almost exact contemporary, Doris Lessing, last year's winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, did. Although their backgrounds were very different (Lessing was born in Africa and spent most of her life in England), Lessing said, when asked recently about her novel *The Golden Notebook,* that she just listened to what women were saying and gave them a voice. So did Grace.

Where did Grace Paley come from? Her parents had emigrated from Ukraine and spoke Russian, Yiddish, and English. Her father, Isaac Goodside (their name was changed from Gutseit) was a physician, and when he settled his family in the Bronx a few years after Grace was born (in Coney Island), the Goodside home became a magnet for intellectuals and political activists who were Communists, socialists, even anarchists. Her given name, which she referred to as *"goyishe"* and "Puritanical," was given her by her older sister, who convinced the parents that Grace deserved a truly American name, and she had a rather ambivalent attitude toward Grace Goodside—proud that it gave her something to live up to, and embarrassed that it embodied characteristics not innately hers.

"I was hardly what you would have called a well-behaved girl," she once told me. "And I'm still not," she added, that beguiling twinkle shimmering from her eyes.

She was an indifferent student, but got out of high school early and left Hunter College after a year, then got a series of menial jobs until she met a photographer named Jess Paley, whom she married in 1942. She followed him to Army camp in North Carolina. After the war they settled in Greenwich Village, where she briefly studied poetry with W. H. Auden at The New School and had her daughter, Nora, in 1949 and her son, Danny, in 1951. Unfortu-

Grace Paley: "I was hardly what you would have called a well-behaved girl."

Grace didn't care. She listened to how her neighbors and friends spoke, she heard their longings and struggles and began to create a world as vivid to me as any in American literature—a world where the men drifted in and out and where the women strove to make ends meet and bring up their noisy, beautiful children in the shadow of the escalating situation in Indochina, which became the Vietnam War. But in so doing she called on all that she had learned as a child growing up in a trilingual house and where one way of looking at the world came from the Yiddish language and literature. Just think about Sholem Aleichem's creation Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* or even that Jewish joke dear to housewives of every generation: A woman with five children goes to the rabbi because she is at the end of her tether. To her surprise he tells her to get a dog, then two cats, a goat, chickens, a cow. She follows his advice and her life becomes even more unbearable. With each visit to the rabbi, she is relieved that she is instructed to get rid of the cow, the chickens, the goat, the cats, and the dog. When all the animals are gone, she feels "like herself" and thanks the rabbi for his good advice, goes home, hugs her children, and looks around her little house with a glimmer of happiness.

nately for her, but perhaps fortunately for posterity, the marriage dissolved. She suddenly had her subject: single, struggling mothers with kids and not enough money, who took deadening jobs to put food on the table but whose desires for sex and companionship were still very much alive. Courageous young women who didn't really want to "make do," who knew that pleasure came in fleeting moments and that if you wanted any you had better not be afraid to grab it whenever, and even wherever, it appeared. That search for sexual pleasure informed all her early work, causing some readers to delight in her frankness and others to call her vulgar.

Here is Grace in the same mode in her story "Faith in a Tree":

> Kitty sewed as she spoke. She looked like
> a delegate to a Conference of Youth from

> the People's Republic of Ubmonsk from Lower Tartaria. A single dark braid hung down her back. She wore a round-necked blouse with capped sleeves made of softened muslin, woven for aged bridesbeds. I have always listened carefully to my friend Kitty's recommendations, for she has made one mistake after another. Her experience is invaluable.

But as she gained more confidence, Grace went even further. One of the best examples was quoted by Margalit Fox in her respectful, affectionate obituary of Grace for *The New York Times*. It occurs at the beginning of "Wants."

> I saw my ex-husband in the street. I was sitting on the steps of the new library.
>
> Hello, my life, I said. We had been married for 27 years, so I felt justified.
>
> He said, What? What life? No life of mine.
>
> I said, O.K. I don't argue when there's real disagreement. I got up and went into the library to see how much I owed them.
>
> The librarian said $32 even and you've owed it for 18 years. I didn't deny anything. Because I don't understand how time passes. I have had those books. I have often thought of them. The library is only two blocks away.
>
> My ex-husband followed me to the Books Returned desk. He interrupted the librarian, who had more to tell. In many ways, he said, as I look back, I attribute the dissolution of our marriage to the fact that you never invited the Bertrams to dinner.
>
> That's possible, I said. But really, if you remember: first, my father was sick that Friday, then the children were born, then I had those Tuesday-night meetings, then the war began. Then we didn't seem to know them anymore. But you're right. I should have had them to dinner.

There are no transitions here, no explanations, hardly any exposition, not even quotation marks around the speech. "Who has the time and energy to type quotation marks?" was her answer to my earnest question about why she didn't use them. Still, in that short passage you can see Grace at the top of her form. She and I used to talk about what wasn't said, the spaces between the words, the places where readers could relax and think, build mental bridges. She called writers who had to show you exactly where their characters were "door-knob turners." It was not what she aspired to. She gave you only a very few well-chosen details describing a place or a character. She wanted you to participate in the story as you read, to make your own pictures of her places and people, and that's why she felt no compunction about surprising you with words or phrases that at first didn't seem to make sense but which, after you'd thought about them, after you'd "got more into the story," made perfect sense.

One of my favorite examples of her ability to compress lives into a paragraph occurs in a story about Faith and her sons called "A Subject of Childhood":

> I have raised these kids, with one hand typing behind my back to earn a living. I have raised them all alone without a father to identify themselves with in the bathroom like all the other little boys in the playground. Laugh. I was forced by inclement management into a yellow-dog contract with Bohemia, such as it survives. I have stuck by it despite the encroachments of kind relatives who offer ski pants, piano lessons, tickets to the rodeo. Meanwhile I have serviced Richard and Tonto, taught them to keep clean and hold an open heart on the subjects of childhood. We have in fact risen mightily from toilets in the hall and scavenging in great cardboard boxes at the Salvation Army for underwear and socks. It has been my perversity to do this alone, except for the one year their father was living in Chicago with Claudia Lowenstill and she was horrified that he only sent bicycles on the fifth birthday. A whole year of gas and electricity, rent and phone payments followed. One day she caught him in the swiveling light of truth. . . . He is now on the gold coast of another continent, enchanted by the survival of clandestine civilizations. Courts of kitchen drama cannot touch him.

A master of carefully chosen language as succinct as the poetry she loved, Grace tells us all we need to know in that fabulous phrase,

"the swiveling light of truth." Of course there is no such thing as truth in most kitchen dramas, or perhaps anywhere else. It is always "her truth, his truth, and then the elusive truth." But by giving truth that brilliant swiveling light we understand in a flash all that happened between Claudia and her lover, and even between Faith and her former husband.

When I got to know Grace in the early 1970s, she was crazy about the work of Isaac Babel, the Russian Jewish writer killed by Stalin in the '30s. "If he can write about a Jewish gangster like Benya Krik," she would say, "we can write about anything." And she did, starting with Aunt Rose from "Goodbye and Good Luck," who was the mistress of an entrepreneur of the Yiddish stage, to Virginia in "An Interest in Life," whose story begins with "My husband gave me a broom one Christmas" (which is a very far cry from Bellow's "I am an American, Chicago born"), to Faith Darwin Asbury, who is constantly searching for the meaning in life in an increasingly complex world. But the trick was to find the right voice. In her interview with A. M. Homes, she said:

> Voice is very important to me. It may not be so important to others, but until I was able to get that voice—which I may have had in ordinary speech as a young person, but I didn't get in prose or poetry, even, until my mid-30s, late 30s—I couldn't really write. I don't even know how people can write if they don't find their voice, their language. It's a mystery to me.

She also loved Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker,* Trollope's *The Way We Live Now,* Turgenev's stories and his novel *Fathers and Sons,* James Joyce's *Dubliners,* Colette, Balzac, the stories of Henry James and D. H. Lawrence. One of the things she did to please me was read Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse,* but she would never love them as much as I did. "Too fancy," she said, in the same tone of voice she used when discussing my attempt to use the word *cross* as a synonym for *angry,* or when I once wrote, "There was a pall over the room." "A pall?" She frowned. "What the hell is that?"

She was especially fond of the work of her friends Donald Barthelme and Kurt Vonnegut, and she admired John Cheever. "They have unmistakable voices, and also don't repeat themselves," she said. That, to her, was one of the greatest sins of a writer, and probably one of the reasons she doesn't have a large body of work—maybe even more important than her devotion to her activities on behalf of so many political causes. One day we were walking down Fifth Avenue to a PEN meeting, and I told her how much I loved Alice Munro's *The Beggar Maid.* "It's okay," she said, "she's a good writer. But she has said it all before." "There's nothing wrong with that," I replied. "After all, wasn't it you who first told me there are only five stories in the world?" In answer she shrugged. I sometimes wondered in the ensuing years what she thought as Munro continued to write so many variations of her childhood and youth in Western Ontario. But I knew better than to ask. Grace had made it clear that she came from the school of, "If you can't say anything good, don't say anything." She hated to criticize writers because she knew how devilishly hard it was to write at all, and she wasn't a fan of reviews; like Barthelme, she thought they should simply encourage writers.

Enormous Changes at the Last Minute came out in 1974. By then she was teaching at Sarah Lawrence and married to her second husband, Bob Nichols; her children were grown, and her life was more stable. In many ways it is a stronger collection than the first. The stories are not quite so outrageous, the language is less insistent (or less hokey, depending on your view), and the characters have more depth. One senses that she is finished trying out so many voices, and story by story she gives you a sense of the neighborhood in which Faith lives, loves, and worries. We see Faith as she sits in a tree, surveying the people on the playground, then interacting with them; we see the transient men appearing and disappearing; we see the beautiful babies becoming fresh little kids who know more than what's good for them; and we go with Faith to the Children of Judea old-age home where her parents have moved and where the dreaded Mrs. Hegel-

Stein rules, upsetting not only the delicate relationship between Faith and her parents, but also the dynamic between her father and mother. Although Faith is still the anchor, she is getting older, and wiser, and, although still optimistic, a tad more cautious. There is also Alexandra of the title story, who is really Faith without children, with a father as perceptive as Faith's father. And there are more tragedies: Samuel in the story of that name gets killed, and although the final paragraph of the story dissolves into sentimentality, it manages to convey the quick changes that occur in a city as volatile as New York, where dangers lurk everywhere.

In this second collection, Grace has also become more adventurous, often putting her characters into unbelievable situations. Yet those people are so real, their feelings so plausible, we are convinced by their troubles and quandaries. In the last story, "The Long-Distance Runner," Faith, like so many mothers of the early '70s, has taken up running—to get in shape and to carve out some private time. She journeys back to the house of her childhood, now populated by poor blacks, and lives with them for a while. Although you know this is impossible, you suspend your disbelief and go as a willing conspirator in the details, which are so genuine, so exact, that the story works perfectly. And at the end, to the question asked by Richard and Anthony (Tonto grown up) and Jack, her lover, "Where were you, Faith?" she says:

> Well! I said. Well! I stayed a few weeks in my old apartment, where Grandpa and Grandma and me and Hope and Charlie lived, when we were little. I took you there long ago. Not so far from the ocean where Grandma made us very healthy with sun and air.
>
> What are you talking about? said Richard. Cut the baby talk.
>
> Anthony came home earlier than expected that evening. . . . He listened to me for a while. Then he said, I don't know what she's talking about either.
>
> Neither did Jack, despite the understanding often produced by love after absence. He said, Tell me again. He was in a good mood. He said, You can even tell it to me twice.
>
> I repeated the story. They all said, What?
>
> Because it isn't usually so simple. Have you known it to happen much nowadays? A woman inside the steamy energy of middle age runs and runs. She finds the houses and streets where her childhood happened. She lives in them. She learns as though she was still a child what in the world is coming next.

Enormous Changes also includes the justly famous story assigned in myriad college classes, "A Conversation with My Father," in which Grace comes as close to giving us her credo about writing fiction as she does anywhere else. When her father, who is 86 and sick, asks her to write a simple story, "the kind Maupassant wrote, or Chekhov," Faith thinks:

> I *would* like to try to tell such a story, if he means the kind that begins: "There was a woman . . . " followed by plot, the absolute line between two points which I've always despised. Not for literary reasons, but because it takes all hope away. Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life.

That means, go wherever your characters take you. Thus, like Malamud and Delmore Schwartz, she had begun to write, before the phrase was coined, her own New York Jewish form of "magical realism." And it is interesting to note that she knew exactly what she was doing. In the same interview quoted above, she said, "I think most writers who are serious are experimental. They all have to figure out new forms every time they write."

Part of the reason I am so attached to *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* may be that it appeared when I was working closely with Grace. She had taken me on as a graduate student in the fall of 1972 with the caveat that I was not going to try to publish anything that year. Since I had gotten only rejection letters to my submissions, I was perfectly happy to abide by her rule. I would meet with her each week, sometimes with a sick child in tow (by then my children were 11, six, and four), and we would settle down in her office and talk for hours about what I had written and what we were reading together. I can still see her thin

fingers grabbing a stubby pencil as she looked at my work. She would read and frown and then draw a determined diagonal line through most of the first page and sometimes part of the second. "The story begins here," she would say. Most of the time she was right. It was she who taught me to write out what I knew about the characters before I started a story so I didn't waste precious words on exposition that, she would say, "the reader will know anyway if you know the characters well enough." I used to tease her that if Tolstoy had been her student she would have cut the first sentence of *Anna Karenina,* to which she would chuckle with delight.

She was a marvelous editor. She could get to the core of the matter faster than anyone. And when she was done, your story was a lot closer to what you had first imagined. It was she who gave me the title for my first published story, "A Bad Baby," which we sent away after our year together and which *The New Yorker* bought. Her reaction was delight at the news, despite the grave injustice that its editors had not yet accepted a story of hers. She also had an uncanny knack for knowing the order of stories and poems. One of the most touching episodes from my days at Sarah Lawrence was when her colleague the poet Jane Cooper told me how distraught she had become when putting together her second collection of poems. "And then Grace arrived, laid all the poems out the floor, and, stepping through them, somehow put them in their logical order."

Another thing she did as a teacher was alert her students to the vagaries of the publishing world. "One swallow doesn't make a summer," she would warn if something was accepted, resorting to a cliché to make her point. "If you want to write fiction keep your overhead low," she would tell us. And when a mutual friend got a promotion at a large publishing house, she warned, "Beware of people in high places."

Like Bernard Malamud and Delmore Schwartz, she had begun to write, before the phrase was coined, her own New York Jewish form of magical realism.

By the time she published *Later the Same Day* in the mid-1980s, Grace's reputation was huge, and those who loved her loved her unconditionally, and those who didn't dismissed the book with faint praise. But now that I have read it so closely again, I realize that none of the reviews really did it justice. It is one of the saddest books I have ever read, almost as if she had decided, finally, to heed her father's frantic advice at the end of "A Conversation with My Father" and "look [tragedy] in the face." Instead of absent husbands and fathers and lovers, there are sick children, missing children, dying mothers, friends who are helpless to give each other comfort; even Faith's own father turns on her and attacks her whole way of life. The men have receded somewhat, and the fierce attachments between the women and their equally fierce love for their grown children, even the ones who have died (like Selena's daughter Abby in "Friends") or are floating somewhere in a limbo of their own making (like Ruthy's daughter, Rachel) are so palpable as to be utterly painful.

There are also regrets—enormous regret informs one of her best stories, "Zagrowsky Tells." Written from the point of view of the pharmacist in the neighborhood, Zagrowsky calls into question much of what Faith and her friends believed in and did (they picketed his store because he was slow to serve the blacks moving into the neighborhood, and never even tried to put themselves in his place, she now realizes), and there is nothing she can do to take those actions back. Nor can she make things better for this man who is stuck taking care of a mentally unstable daughter and his bright, beautiful grandson of color, Emanuel, instead of spending his old age, as he had dreamed, in Florida. A man who, as he is being lectured by Faith, tells us with dignified eloquence:

> I sold the store four years ago. I couldn't put in the work no more. But I wanted to

> show Emanuel my pharmacy, what a beautiful place it was, how it sent three children to college, saved a couple of lives—imagine: one store!

And in the next to last story in *Later the Same Day,* "The Expensive Moment," there is Faith, still struggling with her own emotions, her memories, the questions that plague all of us as we grow older. At the very end of that story, which seems to have tentacles in every aspect of Faith's life, she meets a Chinese woman at a UN meeting who says, "I would like to see how you live." They walk to the river and then back to Greenwich Village.

> They returned along a street of small houses and Faith pointed up to the second-floor apartment where she and Jack had first made love. Ah, the woman said, do you notice that in time you love the children more and the man less? Faith said, Yes! but as soon as she said it, she wanted to run home and find Jack and kiss his pink ears and his 243 last hairs, to call out, Old friend, don't worry, you are loved. . . . She showed her the church basement where she and Ruth and Ann and Louise and their group of mostly women and some men had made leaflets, offered sanctuary to draft resisters. They would probably do so soon again. . . . They walked . . . to neighborhoods where our city, in fields of garbage and broken brick, stands desolate, her windows burnt and blind. Here, Faith said, the people suffer and struggle, their children turn round and round in one place, growing first in beauty, then in rage.

But then the Chinese woman wants to talk. She tells Faith and Faith's friend, Ruthy:

> My youngest sister is permitted to have a child this year, so we often talk thoughtfully. This is what we think: Shall we teach them to be straightforward, honorable, kind, brave, maybe shrewd, self-serving a little? What is the best way to help them in the real world? We don't know the best way. You don't want them to be cruel, but you want them to take care of themselves wisely. Now my children are nearly grown. Perhaps it's too late. Was I foolish? I didn't know in those years how to do it.
>
> Yes, yes, said Faith. I know what you mean. Ruthy?
>
> Ruthy remained quiet.
>
> Faith waited a couple of seconds. Then she turned to the Chinese woman. Oh, Xie Feng, she said. Neither did I.

This story has more the feel of a memoir, a memoir of a woman who, despite her usual optimism and good cheer, is getting discouraged about this country, which she loves, and whose personal life is narrowing in ways she is finding difficult. Who sometimes seems haunted by those who have died before their time or whose dreams remain far from fulfilled. As a result, her characters are not as resilient as they once were, and their vivid, often impulsive actions are replaced by thoughtful hindsight that sometimes veers into melancholy. I finally realize what Grace was telling us: She was finished making stories. Just as she had known she would never write a novel ("I don't have the *Zitzfleisch,*" she said), she had decided it was time to stop writing fiction. It was as if she was saying, Even I, with my unique talent, can no longer use my distinctive prose to turn joy and yearning and sorrow into gold.

After that she wrote essays, memoirs, vignettes, and, finally, the poetry she had always wanted to write. But her *Collected Stories,* which was a finalist for both the 1994 National Book Awards and the 1995 Pulitzer Prize, is as fine and brave a body of work as anything written by any American, man or woman, in the second half of the 20th century.

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