



Solitude, Beauty, Serenity

(A "LONG-LIVING" PERSON)

By RUTH C. COHN

To write about me, what I deem important: that I have lived for many years—in Europe and the United States; my happiness has been to live creatively; to create in words, in deeds, in relationships—something that I want to be more effective or more beautiful or just to be. Sadness has been where there was breakdown of love or emptiness. For quick professional classification: I have been a poetess; a psychotherapist, integrating the thoughts of various schools of psychotherapy; and an

educator working on holistic ways of education and communication (the Theme-Centered Interactional Method). In this spirit, I am the founder/director of the Workshop Institute for Living-Learning. Future goals: spreading W.I.L.L.'s work into our school systems, social and political organizations, and inter-writing the W.I.L.L. Book. Thereafter: enjoy other people's creations and continue living-learning—333 Central Park West, Apt. 32, New York City 10025.

It is a day; *my day*. I own my day. I have taken possession of it.

I woke up this morning with a glowing feeling: this is *my day*, a whole day which I will protect, shelter, love as I would my own little baby.

My own day—carefully shielded from the bulk of other days filled with too many people, too many papers and calls and musts and oughts and "realities"; heaped around me by long-range objectives which, to fulfill, require the discomfort and often agony of giving time away, *my time*, to maintenance and coordination and programming work.

My-time-day! Tomorrow I'll do what I think I owe to my long-range purpose in life. Long ago Carl Whitaker said whenever he thought of me, he thought of "Purpose." I didn't understand that about me then. Now I do! I hate it, I love it, I accept it. It's me; purpose. My life is dedicated to "purpose." That is bad; or is it? Could I enjoy my-own-island-hours as much if they were common occurrences?

Today is Island-Day. My being-just-me day. Mine to serve it to myself in slices of hours, minutes, seconds; or swallow it whole in a sleep-heap, or in waves of day-dreams, or as a music festival or . . . ?

Today is my day. Being here. Without purpose.

I catch myself. This day too has a purpose. The purpose is to rest and to be open to quietude, centered-ness, receptivity, to become one with myself—

Into my mind enters Kate; Kate about whom I wanted to write when I received VOICE's suggestion to write for the issue on "Loneliness, Ugliness, Craziness." I changed the title for me into "Solitude, Beauty, Serenity." Because Kate was on my mind then. She had just died.

If she lived, I might not sit here and write. I might be on my way to her, my 87 year old neighbor Kate Auerbach, who used to live 2 houses north from me on Central Park West, until she died quietly during her summer vacation on a farm in Vermont.

She would have opened the door and shown me—before we sat down—the last and (always) best wall hanging she ever made—made out of wood, silk, cotton and acorns, pebbles, straw, seashells. . . .

One of her last pictures hangs on the wall I'm facing now. "Toward Peace" we named it—after hours of search for a title. She used to say: "It does not matter how you call it—everybody sees it as he sees it." Yet the name *did* matter to her as it did to me. We named this mountain-valley-sky abstract thread-and-pebble picture "Toward Peace."

If she lived I would go to Kate now—on my way "toward peace."

Kate Auerbach at 87 was at the height of her creative life. She was "long living," as a people in the Caucasus say. Her brown eyes sparkled under her white hair when she exclaimed: "This piece of green glass—doesn't it look beautiful?" "This part here I must change, it isn't right—but I know already how I'll change it. There, it needs some red. See how that livens it up!"

By the end of a half hour she also had served tea and listened to my happy and sad stories and had told me about how a teenage friend who had slept on her couch had been understood, scolded and made to feel important; and then been sent on her way to grow up a bit faster. And then Kate went back to work on her last and (always) most beautiful of all her creations. ("Creation" is the name of her other picture I own). —To make a picture took a long time. Kate's fingers were bent by arthritis and she needed time and ingenuity to use them for work.

Kate started to "paint" with threads at age 70, when she resigned from her sweater designing job and "had left-over wool to use up." She received the First Prize of the "Pen and Brush Club, N.Y." at 85; a One-Man (!) Show in New York City. Her pictures sold at hundreds of dollars and paid for her vacations and Europe trips.

After each visit I felt that something in me had been created—or maybe re-opened: the road to owning "my-time," to being a Being, graced with the gift of being alive; and in my way able to make beautiful things out of the multiple (wool, cotton, silk) threads of life—and the pebbles, glass, twigs, seashells of everyday's incoming tides.

Now I feel the happiness of coming from visiting her as if it were real in time.

Shortly after she died I read an article by Scoggins in Shneidman's magazine *Life-Threatening Behavior*. He reviewed a book on *Functional Disengagement*. Scoggins objects to the request that old people should be helped to disengage themselves from social and sociable concerns—to work toward disengagement from living—for their own dying's sake.

A chilling thought: to help people toward "functional disengagement" from being alive into living death—to be satisfied with past thought and to make step-by-step a walk into inner contentment by lessening involvement with people and objectives.

I was grateful to Scoggins and wrote him so. The step from respect for individuals as living, involved persons to "thinging" them into withering, useless particles of society is a threat to humanity. Thoughts similar to this "functional disengagement" theory are floating around in many ways: why let people live so long? They are useless—to themselves and others. They cost money and cause trouble. Why not resolve the population explosion by reducing permissible life-duration!

Such thoughts may still seem far-fetched to most civilized citizens; they are not far-fetched in a world where people are being "thinged" and experienced as numbers, stamped for use—anonymous figures—

This day is mine. I have owned my last two hours—thinking and writing about Kate. The living Kate was my friend and a person who to me represented earthly inspiration and transcending wisdom; a feeling, thinking, loving human being, here for people and for beauty and for herself.

I want to share with you a letter she wrote me (in German) twelve days before she died; in the spirit which makes leaves rustle, birds sing, and a raindrop bring tears and sunshine into hearts.

Vermont
August 24, 1971

Ruth my dear,

I believe that my birthday wishes for you will arrive at about the right time. My hearty good wishes for a good, healthy, successful, beautiful year—with all kinds of love coming to you—also for your heart and soul...

I have had a beautiful summer here—it has been ten weeks today that I have been here, and I still have two weeks to go. Time flew by fast. I was much alone, with myself and the beloved countryside. The landscape is not spectacular, but special in its beauty; lovely and soothing.

Very dear people came to see me here... I also have a very close relationship with my dear young host—and his wife who spoil me tremendously. And I also met new people who indulge me a lot, and I let them do so with the greatest pleasure!

I have made a picture here. My hosts, believe that this one is my very best. I, myself, don't have the necessary distance from it yet—it is not quite finished, but will be for the Annual Artists and Craftsmen Exhibit at Lever House by the middle of September.

Healthwise I am not as satisfied as I should be after these ten weeks. I had three attacks of congestive heart failure which could be relieved within a day with oxygen and lasix; the third time even alone without the help of a physician. So it seems that I have to figure on such things happening. I count my blessings and think about all that is still good with my almost eighty-seven years, and I regard the rest of my life as a special gift and savor it as such.

I hope you have had a good summer, and now it's work again. I hope you will come back to New York in good health and satisfied with a relaxed vacation and successful work, and that you will soon let me know that you have returned.

With my very warm regards,

Kate

A letter from a "Long-Living Person"—one, who never practiced "functional disengagement"—lived with joy and died with dignity.

Last year Kate told me—after one of her choking heart-attacks—what she had thought, when she believed she was about to die: "O.K.—that's the end of my life; it was good." □

Beauty, Serenity
(PERSON)

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SOLITUDE, BEAUTY, SERENITY