

THE LIFE OF GRACE W. KING, by Andrew W. King
(as delivered at her Memorial Service, January 31, 2015)

Grace King was certainly privileged to live a long, full life, 91 years and almost 8 months, and spanning the terms of 16 US presidents! Born April 20, 1923, Warren Harding was in the White House, George V was King of England, his granddaughter, our present queen, was not to come into the world for another 3 years and one day! Over in Germany, Adolf Hitler, probably not yet a “household name”, was probably celebrating his 34th birthday!

And into this world in a Portsmouth NH hospital was born a baby girl by the name of Grace Elizabeth Wentworth, the first child of Chauncey and Sara Wentworth. Chauncey had recently been appointed minister of the Methodist church in East Eliot, Maine, although he was still finishing his divinity degree.

Three siblings followed Grace into the world over the next 4 years: Dorothy Helen, John Warren, and Ruth Florence. The family moved every few years within Maine, as Chauncey was transferred from one parish to another. Chauncey and Sara saw to it that their children got a proper Christian and Methodist upbringing. The children used to dread every 6 years when Christmas would fall on a Sunday, because they were not allowed to open their presents until Monday morning! Life was not always easy for the family during those Depression years, although they seemed to get by. Like Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Chauncey sometimes had to accept payment for his services in unusual ways, in his case often in venison or turnips!

Grace went off to college in 1941 on the eve of World War II, to the Univ. of Maine, and decided to major in chemistry. Applying for Ph.D. programs in her senior year, she was accepted by Yale, which asked if she could come a semester early, and allowed her to take courses there to finish her Maine degree; it seems that with many men in the service, they needed her services as a TA.

She was assigned to work under a young instructor named Edward J. King who had received his Ph.D. at Yale a couple of years earlier and was asked to stay on at Yale to teach “for the duration”. The teaching job may actually have been a “cover” for his other work at Yale, which had exempted him from the services; he was part of a team working on the Manhattan Project.

Anyway Grace and Ed soon fell in love, and were married February 23, 1946 by her father in his church in Orono, ME.

During the spring of 1946 Ed also got the not unexpected news that, now that the “duration” was over, he would have to leave Yale at the end of the current academic year. His best or only offer for a new job was from Barnard College. Ed (who came from Iowa) and Grace (from Maine) were both horrified at the prospect of moving to New York, but decided they would take the job for a couple of years and then move on. Well apparently in those two years they discovered that

the “bad rap” that New York gets in most of the rest of the country was nonsense, so New York (and in particular the Morningside Heights neighborhood) became their home for the rest of their lives.

Grace was offered a part-time job at Barnard as well, running the freshman chemistry laboratories, which she did for two years, 1946-48. At that point she decided it was time to finish her Ph.D., so for a year she commuted almost every day by train to New Haven to work with her adviser at Yale. Also during the late forties while Grace and Ed were having difficulty in starting their own family, Grace decided to help out another family in need; through an international aid agency she located a family in Karlsruhe, Germany, the husband had been killed in the war, and for several years she sent them Care packages to help them get back on their feet..

Grace received her Ph.D. in 1950 and shortly afterwards got the welcome news that she was pregnant (with me). I came into the world April 6, 1951, but then in the 1950s Grace’s career seemed to be headed on a different trajectory. After enrolling me in the nursery school in this very church, she got the idea she would like to be a teacher there herself, she even went to night school at Bank Street College of Education (back when it really was on Bank St. in the Village) to get a Teaching Certificate. At any rate she taught 4 years at Riverside’s Nursery School, followed by a year at a nursery school in Elmsford NY.

That career came to an end when our whole family went to Reading England for Ed’s sabbatical year in 1959-60. Upon getting back to Barnard, Ed, who was taking over as chairman of the chemistry department was faced with a dilemma; the woman who was to run the freshman labs had resigned at the 11th hour. Grace mentioned casually that maybe she could do the job (the same job she had held from 1946-48) and thus began her long second career at Barnard, which lasted until 1992. She was away from Barnard and NY for 2 years during that time, 1966-67 when our whole family went to Armidale Australia on Ed’s next sabbatical, and 1973-4 when she and Ed went to Newcastle-upon-Tyne England. Unfortunately while there, in November of 1973, Ed passed away from cancer, but Grace stayed on in Newcastle until June, continuing some of the research that he had started.

Grace worked part time in the chemistry department at Barnard until 1969, and then, since I was going off to college that fall, and deciding she wanted to work full time, took a second part time job at Barnard as a class adviser, and later an Associate Dean, in the Dean of Studies office. After a few years she settled down to being the Senior Class Dean and chairman of the Commencement Committee. She worked the two jobs until 1987, when she “retired” from the chemistry department and worked full time in the Dean’s Office, taking on the Junior Class Dean responsibilities as well, until 1992 when she finally retired from Barnard, at the age of 69.

In the months leading up to her retirement she often talked about how she wanted to buy some good walking shoes and spend time exploring unfamiliar parts of New York City. Unfortunately that turned out to be largely a pipe dream, as she soon found herself with some new responsibilities. In 1970 we had moved into the Mt. Cenis co-op, on Morningside Drive, and Grace served on the co-op board for much of the 1970s and 1980s, first as secretary and later as treasurer. At that time the building was self-managed and residents would volunteer to be “house

manager” for generally a 2 or 3-year stint. She had told the board that when she retired from Barnard she would do such a stint, except that in her case the 2-3 years stretched into 9! Then following a one-year break she was persuaded to do it for a 10th and final year. It was a thankless job, unpaid of course, but I know that she got much satisfaction and enjoyment out of it, it certainly kept her busy into her retirement!

I should also mention some of her outside interests. She was a great lover of classical music, had taken piano lessons for a year or two as a child, and was particularly fond of opera. She maintained subscriptions at 5 of Lincoln Center’s constituencies for many years.

Another interest which she took up in her early married years was genealogy, doing research into both hers and Ed’s family. By the 1970’s and ‘80s she didn’t have much time for it, but took it up again in her retirement, I had helped her with it some back in the ‘60s, and am hoping during my own retirement to pick up some of the threads that she left.

And finally I should mention her passion for Jolly Island, a 46-acre island in Lake Winnepesaukee, New Hampshire, which had been settled as a summer retreat in 1892-93 by a group of 9 Methodist ministers and laymen. When Grace’s family moved to Orono in the early 40s, amongst Chauncey’s parishioners were Bertrand and Evelyn Brann, the owners of one of the camps there (at which Grace’s mother, Sara, had stayed for two years, in 1907 and 1908). The Branns invited Chauncey and Sara there for 3 summers in the ‘40s, Grace went there for the first time in 1945 with her family and returned the following year, 1946, bringing her new husband, Ed. Then there was a break of several years when they were unable to go, but in 1955, our whole family went for the first time, and then Grace went for a portion of every summer through 2009. We rented the camp from the Branns in the early years, until in the fall of 1968, with Mrs. Brann having passed away, her husband deeded it to Ed and Grace. Grace loved the place, in her early retirement years she would stay there from the first of July into late September and came to be considered almost the “lady of the manor”. I think it quite fitting that her ashes are to be taken there to be scattered on the ground that she loved and cared for so well.

And sadly no account of Grace’s life would be complete without a mention of her last 10 – 15 years. Around the turn of the century those of us close to her began to notice a change; she began having difficulty finding the words she wanted to say, eventually leading to the point where it became increasingly difficult to understand her, and finally to the point where she could not talk at all, except for a random utterance. And she began to need more help in attending to her daily needs and household chores, thus forcing me, to become the adult figure, to help my increasingly childlike mother navigate a seemingly unfamiliar world. Eventually it came to the point where we needed outside help and in 2008 turned to the Partners in Care agency, a part of the Visiting Nurse Service of New York. And we were very lucky to get the services of Iona Bartholomew, who became very devoted to her and gave her excellent care, probably extending her life by a couple of years. In the summer of 2010 after a brief hospitalization with pneumonia, Grace became unable to walk, so was mostly bedridden for the rest of her life, with occasional rides outside in a wheelchair. But throughout this time she seemed to maintain a determined will to live, even though it didn’t seem like there was much left for her to live for. But she finally did pass away, December 15, 2014 after about a 24 hour illness.

But will she ever really leave us. I think not, it seems like her spirit is still with me, encouraging me to lead the kind of life she would have wanted. And I'm sure many of you in this room will also feel that the inspiration she gave everyone will live on for as long as we live ourselves.