Tribute to Grayce M. Sills
My Colleague, My Friend

Grayce M. Sills, RN, PhD, FAAN, would have reached her 90th birthday April 18, 2016. However, she did not make that landmark date, having died on April 3, 2016. This editorial celebrates her long and full life by providing stories, details, and remembrances that are more personal and more familiar to her extended networks and family.

THE SILLS AND THE SMOYAKS

Hildegard (Hilda) E. Peplau introduced Grayce to our family in the mid-1960s, when she invited her to visit the Rutgers Graduate Program in Psychiatric Nursing and provide lectures and consultation. This was an immediate “match” because our values and interests were so similar.

Every summer, as Neil, my husband, and our children traveled West so that I could conduct workshops in various states, our first stop was Carrilla Lane, Columbus, Ohio—Grayce’s home. We could find this without a map or GPS (of course, there were none at that time). We stayed with her one or two nights, and then continued on. She was an excellent hostess, and a great cook.

The bathroom in Grayce’s home was especially elegant, with a carpeted floor and Lifesaver® soaps in different “flavors.” Our daughter, Lisa, after these visits, would try to get us to redo our bathroom. We’d go along with the soap, but not the carpet.

Among Grayce’s talents was blowing smoke rings. No one remembers how she developed this skill, but she could blow little, medium, and big rings. Our son, Mark, was totally fascinated by this, and would always plead for her to make “thmoke” rings. Mark served as the son she never had.

Our kids became very close to Kathee, Grayce’s daughter. Our oldest, Debbi, and Kathee were close to being sisters. They insisted on having the same cowboy boots, shirts, and other apparel purchased in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Grayce became my student during the summer of 1972, when she registered for a 6-week course on family therapy provided by the University of New Mexico, College of Nursing. She participated in lecture sessions by Hilda and me, but the family work was my domain. Hilda and I conducted summer sessions and workshops throughout the United States, for nearly 25 years, from the early 1960s through the early 1980s. One of the more cherished and memorable sites was the University of New Mexico, in Albuquerque, with Nazareth Hospital and its associated Dominican convent, which provided space for the teaching. The students and faculty all lived on the first floor, in separate rooms, with shared dining and living rooms in the convent.

In New Mexico, Neil and I became Kathee’s “adjunct” parents, as Grayce was away for many hours, many of them during the evenings, as she visited families for sessions. Grayce was a very gentle and kind mother; Kathee rarely heard a harsh word or correction. Neil and I, on the other hand, were very authoritarian. Kathee found this switch in parental behaviors troubling at first. She tried hard to adjust. One evening, when she came back from playing with our kids, she was covered in blisters from poison ivy or oak. I put her in the bathtub, with a whole box of baking soda, and told her to stay there until I returned from the hospital. My intent was to get chlorotrimeton from the adolescent unit. But when I got there, I had to help settle a general turmoil that had erupted. More than 1 hour passed before I went back to the convent. Poor Kathee was still in the cold bath water. Although Neil tried to get her out, she said, “I can’t! Shirley told me to stay put.” Grayce was not upset with this, especially when Kathee was entirely blister-free in the morning.

Kathee could not carry a tune, perhaps because she could not hear one. She had a special sort of tone-deafness. On long rides on the weekends, to the Sandia Mountains and tribal places, Debbi would sit on one side of Kathee and Karen, another of our daughters, on the other, and try singing in her ears. Kathee didn’t enjoy this, and when she complained, Grayce told her, “Kathee, just listen! You might learn something, just as I am, in very different and strange situations.” Kathee listened, and now reports that she can hold a tune.
HILDA AND GRAYCE

Grayce met Hilda when she traveled to New York City to study at Teachers College in 1951-1952. Before that, Grayce had earned a diploma at Rockland State Hospital in Orangeburg, New York—the hospital about which The Snake Pit (Ward, 1946) was written. Grayce returned to her native Ohio and began working at the state hospital in Dayton. When Hilda was invited to conduct workshops there, in 1957, she met Grayce again. For Hilda, the most memorable and awful part of that hospital experience was that she met patients who had been mutilated by Dr. Walter Freeman, who conducted lobotomies on random patients by inserting a thin ice pick post-orbitally, with no anesthesia (Callaway, 2002). Grayce and Hilda talked with the staff nurses endlessly, who described how helpless and hopeless they felt about these patients. The inability to stop this ruthless practice formed a strange bond between the two new colleagues (Callaway, 2002).

For the 1972 American Nurses Association (ANA) election, Grayce served as one of Hilda’s orchestrators for the nomination and then the campaign. Grayce also contributed elegant material, which she had brought from Thailand, for Hilda’s gown for the ANA convention parade of states. By 1985, Grayce had become interim dean of nursing at the Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. A new tradition began, with Grayce appointing Hilda as visiting professor, for 1 month each summer, for years.

Grayce and Hilda both enjoyed visiting casinos and playing the various slot machines. In the early days, the slots still had the levers that one pulled down after selecting a bet. Grayce took pride in telling folks that she exercised, and that her right arm was especially fit. In October 1996, after an American Psychiatric Nurses’ Association meeting in San Diego, California, Grayce rented a car; she and Hilda headed out across the desert to the gambling town of Laughlin, Nevada. After dinner at a casino, Hilda went to bed, but Grayce got her second wind and returned to play more slots. She told us that she had a feeling that luck was to be with her. At 2:00 a.m., she hit the jackpot and became a millionaire.

SHIRLEY AND GRAYCE

Grayce and I did have some disagreements—not personal—but professional.

As a group of psychiatric nurses, still affiliated with ANA, we were considering starting our own specialty organization, and Grayce (even before her big casino win) thought we should each find $10,000 in our own resources, or borrow that amount, hire a director, and start our association.

The root issue was always money. After all, I would say to her, “How can I expect you to understand money, when you pull a lever and become a millionaire?” She would retort, “But I never said or believed that it grew on trees.” She did use this saying, as did Neil, when Kathee or one of our kids asked for something that was expensive or “unreasonable.” Once, when Kathee and Debbi wanted new boots, they were told about the money and trees. Both reached up to a tree, grabbed a few leaves, gave them to Neil and said, “You’re a Deacon, so pray and make this money.”

Money no longer matters to Grayce. But I believe her networks still do. She and Neil are probably enjoying each other and collaborating in Heaven.

REFERENCES


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