

Kay Dilger Metcalfe

by Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk

As Kay Metcalfe's 100th birthday approached in 2012, the Ladies Benevolent Society (LBS) was planning a big celebration in the town hall. But Kay had other ideas. The noise level in big groups is almost unbearable for her now due to her impaired hearing. So, as she has done throughout her life, Kay decided that when it came to her birthday, she would take matters into her own hands. A big party was out of the question. Instead, she told Ruby Goodnoff, the president of the LBS, that people could gather on the front lawn of the home she shares with her daughter, Sue, sing "Happy Birthday," and that would be all the celebration she needed.

On November 15, 2012, that was the way it was. There was a small family party but no large gala. Townspeople shared cupcakes and birthday wishes on the lawn. And Kay was presented with a huge handmade card on which many people had expressed their birthday wishes.

All her life, Kay has used writing to express her deepest thoughts and reach out to others. So it was not surprising that the December 21 issue of the *Plainfield Post*, the town's biweekly newsletter, contained a thank you note from Kay. Expressing her thanks to the whole town, she wrote:



I found my 100th birthday party to be quite an event. Plainfield is a wonderful place to live in because people are caring, thoughtful, concerned, with fun and enjoyment—with rosy cupcakes too! My thanks are birds flying to you on their way south with much of my appreciation.

This note reflects the centenarian that many in Plainfield know and love—Kay with her outgoing personality, her appreciation of beauty, her metaphoric way with words, and her sense of humor. For someone who is heading into her second century,

Kay seems remarkably positive and open to living (see Brody, “100 Candles on Her Next Cake” and “Secrets of the Centenarians”). How can we explain these qualities in someone of her advanced age? In order to explore this question, I held three lengthy interviews with Kay in the summer of 2007, when she was 94 years old. I soon discovered that part of the explanation for Kay’s resilience and vitality in old age goes all the way back to childhood.

Childhood and Young Adulthood

After the first interview, which focused on her early years, I summed up my impressions of the young Mary Kathryn Dilger:¹



What emerges for me from these memories is a snapshot taken with a Brownie box camera. I see a girl with bright eyes and a warm smile. She wears a lovely dress crisply starched and ironed by her mother. She is a girl who is loved and who knows it—a girl who feels comfortable with herself and with the world in which she lives. But don’t be misled by this Kodak image. She is not just a lucky little girl of her time. Even as a child, Kay Dilger is a deep thinker and a questioner.

This is how Kay described herself as a young girl: “I was always little. And people always made a fuss over me because I was cute and little.” One of Kay’s earliest memories is her first day of school in “a little square red-brick building” just down the street from her home in

Noblesville, Indiana. This momentous day is still clear in Kay’s mind nearly ninety years later: “As I walked in the door, I knew I was late—that was a *terrible* thing, to be late. At least I thought it was. And I saw two long black pants and these black shiny shoes walking towards me. I never saw him, I just saw these shoes coming towards me, and I started to cry.” The shoes belonged to the school’s principal, and even at such an early age, Kay knew enough to be scared of the principal. But then the teacher came out and took her to the classroom and made her feel “okay.”

¹In high school, she decided she wanted to be known as Kay, a name that has lasted the rest of her life.

As Kay describes her childhood, she usually felt “okay,” a sense of security and well-being that seems to have been rooted in her relationship with her parents. Born in 1912, to Mathias Owen and Bess Fagley Dilger, Kay was the second child in a comfortable, middle-class family. Her father had graduated from Ohio State University with an engineering degree and went on to have a successful career in business. Her mother stayed home and took care of the family.

Kay described some of her favorite childhood memories in a reminiscence written in October 2008 in honor of a new great-grandson, Owen Robert Beirlein, named in honor of his great-great grandfather, Kay’s father, whose middle name was Owen. She writes fondly of the

“White House” in Noblesville, where she spent the earliest days of her childhood: “There was a grapevine-covered arbor at the back. Dad built swings at either end, one for Betty [Kay’s sister, who was



three years older] and one for me. Great fun abounded to see how high we could swing or be swung.” These were idyllic days, at least as seen in retrospect: “In my mind’s eye, I still view Mother in the kitchen rolling out egg noodles and fried mush and cooking good food. Dad often helped me to read words from his newspaper. . . . If one of us was sick, Dad would bring a squab home from the Company’s roof to stew a health-healing broth.”

Father’s arrival home from work each evening was a much-anticipated event: “The big thrill of the day towards 5 o’clock, Betty and I would be found running up the block to meet our Dad riding his bicycle home from work at the Eveready National Carbon Company. Dad would stop to put one or the other of us on the handlebars for the rest of the ride home. This was ‘Wow’ time.”

The family moved around quite a bit as Kay's father was transferred from Noblesville, Indiana, to Lakewood, Ohio, and then to Scarsdale, New York. But Kay did not seem overly upset by these moves. When I asked whether it was hard to start over again as a new student in the third grade in Ohio, she said, "No. That didn't bother me one bit." The only difficulty she recalls about this move was watching with some trepidation as the movers maneuvered the family's upright player piano, using "a rope of some kind" to get the instrument into an upstairs window. This piano was much more than just a piece of furniture for the Dilger family. As Kay described in her 2008 reminiscence, the piano, a Melville-Clark, was much treasured by her father, who had loved music from childhood on. Kay too loves music as revealed by this passage from her



writing: "With foot pedals pumping, music came forth from rolls of perforations placed above the keyboard. Liszt's #2 Hungarian Rhapsody remained a favorite of mine long after."

One of Kay's most vivid memories from the Ohio years involved her role in a minstrel show produced by the Free Masons, a group her father belonged to: "I was that cute little thing, and I was supposed to cakewalk across the front of the stage. I can remember Mother getting me black stockings to wear on my arms and legs. And she painted my face black and curled my hair tightly in white rags." Kay made it clear that she understood that a performance like this would have been inappropriate and offensive in later years "as it should be," but she went on to say that "in those days it was quite proper." In fact, whether or not such racial impersonations were "proper," at the time of Kay's stage debut around 1920, they were quite common, a staple of American popular entertainment.

What is most telling about this memory of Kay's is not the performance genre but rather her characterization of herself as "that cute little thing." Being "cute and little," an

idea she mentioned earlier in describing herself as a child, was an important part of her self-image. In fact, even as an elderly woman, Kay still fits this description, always neatly and colorfully dressed with coordinating pins and earrings and standing, at age 100, about five feet tall.

But though Kay may have seen herself, as others saw her, as a cute little thing, she was not fragile. When I asked Kay if she felt nervous during the early minstrel performance or enjoyed being onstage, she quickly replied, “I really thought this was fun. Of course, I was half scared too.” In describing this childhood experience, Kay also describes an approach to living that has served her well, enabling her to take on challenges in every phase of her life. She is not stopped by situations in which she feels “half scared” but keeps going with a sense that everything will be all right in the end.

Kay’s family lived in Lakewood through her first year and a half of high school, and she recalls these years with fondness: “Those were wonderful days. I always had a group of friends, and we did all the things kids did in those days.” She especially remembers Halloween when they would do “all the nasty things we could think of.” Things like soaping people’s windows or putting pins in the doorbells to make them keep ringing. She seemed to delight in describing another prank in which the kids would “have a pocketbook lying on the sidewalk with a string attached to it. And we’d just wait for somebody to go by and pick it up. And then we’d pull the string!” Kay went on to compare these tricks with Halloween pranks today: “You know today this would be *nothing!*”

Thinking back on those days, Kay said, “It was a really nice childhood.” She and her parents went to Sunday school regularly at the neighborhood Presbyterian church, and every Wednesday night the family attended prayer meeting. Her parents bought a book called *Hurlbut’s Story of the Bible for Young and Old*, which she and her sister read and re-read until they knew all the stories very well.

I asked Kay what values she felt she had learned from her family—her parents and grandparents. She quickly responded, “You have to be honest was one of the *main* things, I recall. . . . And I think a certain pride was involved. Mother would say, ‘Well, if you do that, what are the neighbors going to think?’ . . . As I look back on it, I think my mother controlled us pretty much by that usage.” Family pride was important in the

Dilger family—a lesson that Kay learned at an early age:

I felt that my mother and my father could never, ever do anything wrong. They were perfect. And I guess I felt that way about my grandmother too. . . . [E]ven after they died, I can remember saying, “I don’t think I want to do that. What would my grandmother think? She’s up in heaven, you see.” Even grandma was still controlling.

Although Kay respected the elders in her family and grew to share their sense of family pride, it would be false to assume that she felt bound to conform to the family values in childhood or in later life. On the contrary, what strikes me about her as an older woman is her independent-mindedness in matters such as religion, her eagerness to break new ground, to assert her own values of right and wrong, good and bad. When I asked whether the feeling of being controlled by her parents and grandmother ever went away, she said that it did, but she wasn’t sure *when* or *why* it happened. Then, after a short pause, she continued:

But I do know I kept asking my mother questions: How could this be? And she never really had a very good answer for any of them. But I liked to wonder about things. And I would wonder about things like, “Now I’m looking across the street, and those people are walking by. That will never happen again in that same exact [way]. There’ll be people walking across the street, people walking, which will be the same, but that one person will never be the same.” I used to wonder about things like that.

This memory from childhood, recalled many years later, suggests that Kay was indeed a very observant and reflective child and brings to mind other girls from the past who were similarly reflective. The interview excerpt quoted above, for example, is reminiscent of an observation from the posthumously published autobiography of Margaret Fuller, the nineteenth-century thinker, writer, and women’s rights advocate. In a striking passage, Fuller describes a kind of transcendental awakening she experienced while walking in the woods on Thanksgiving Day in 1831 during which she recalls a childhood memory: “I remembered how, a little child, I had stopped myself one day on the stairs, and asked how came I here? How is it that I seem to be this Margaret Fuller? What does it mean? What shall I do about it?” Like Margaret, Kay was a woman ahead of her time, a free thinker and questioner even in childhood.

And like Margaret Fuller, Kay had the sense that she was different, not like all the other children her age. Although she has always been social and well accepted by her peers, she felt, even as a child, there was something that set her apart from others:

I don't know why, but I had the feeling that . . . for some reason I wasn't born to know all of this stuff the other kids seemed to know. And then I thought, "Oh, well. So what? I'll make it out on my own." And I think that idea has stuck with me the rest of my whole life, that I'm responsible.

This idea, first formulated in childhood, that Kay was "responsible" for her own life, has been a guiding principle for her and may be a key factor in her positive attitude and resilience in old age. At a time of life when many people feel that they are no longer in control of their own life, Kay continues to be responsible, finding a way, even in the face of the inevitable constraints that come with age, to "make it out on [her] own."

Later in the interview, Kay confirmed the importance of being responsible for herself as she explained her lifelong relationship with her sister, who was so different from her. According to Kay, "I just knew she was different, and I had to go my own way. I had to worry about myself." I broke in at this point to say, "You've said that a few times. Responsibility. . . . You felt very self-sufficient in some way." She agreed: "I really did. And I think I have more or less ever since. And I think my parents realized this. But they didn't know what to do about it."

As a child, Kay was an independent thinker, determined to find her own way in life. But she grew up in a time when children were expected to conform to a strict code of discipline at home and in school. And Kay did not rebel against this code. Everyone dressed neatly for school, and when the bell rang, the children formed into orderly groups of four, and marched to the next class as a teacher played the piano.

One of the highlights of her junior high school years was a "music memory contest," an optional activity held after school. The children would listen to brief excerpts of the classics on records and then write down the names of the composers. The winners from each class would later go to a big hall in Cleveland to compete. This musical contest was the beginning of Kay's love for classical music. Both she and her sister later took piano lessons, and though Betty eventually became quite accomplished, Kay did not. After much practice, she was finally able to play about five minutes of one piece. As she

explains: “I loved the idea of playing the piano, but I wasn’t all that good at it.”

Another habit from childhood *has* persisted into adulthood and old age—Kay’s fascination with the written word. She explains, “Even as a child, I was terribly interested in words. Starting in junior high school, I had a little booklet, one of those black and white books. I would copy things that I liked there. I’ve done that ever since.” Even at age 100, Kay often relies on a thesaurus to explore the nuances of words, and she keeps a notebook close at hand, where she writes quotations and ideas sparked by her reading.

In explaining how her family first came to Plainfield, Kay says that it was her own childhood illness that led them to Massachusetts. One summer when Kay was about twelve, she contracted scarlet fever. A friend of her father’s named Mr. Williams, a veteran of the First World War, owned some land in western Massachusetts on Windsor Pond, a small lake located between the towns of Plainfield and Windsor. Williams advised his friend to take the family there for a camping trip so that Kay could recover in the fresh, country air. Kay’s father erected a tent, and Williams cut pine boughs and laid them on the ground for the family to sleep on, built a latrine, and provided them with mess kits left over from the war. The family spent two weeks there, and, miraculously, Kay did recover. She remembers this as a special time in the life of the family: “Mr. Williams built the fires. He knew how to keep them going even when it rained. We’d go down to the lake and wash our mess kits and then come back and hang them on a nail on a tree. Oh, it was wonderful. We all, even my father, fell in love with the place.”



A few years later, when Mr. Williams decided to sell his lakeside plot, Kay’s father was eager to buy it. In 1936, he built a cabin, and the family vacationed there every

summer. When Kay and her sister were married and had children of their own, they continued to spend summer vacations and occasional weekends at the cabin. Kay remembers these visits fondly: “Sometimes it got so I’d stay the whole week with the children. My husband would come up on weekends on the train.” Even in these early days, they shared a sense of community with other summer residents. Kay especially mentioned the Maurer family, who lived in the Forest Hills area of Queens in New York City and were “almost like family.” She’s still in touch with members of this family, who continue to vacation in Plainfield in the summertime.

In 1946, Kay’s father bought an old farmhouse up the hill beyond Windsor Pond. “Before this,” Kay explains, “I had no connection with Plainfield at all because our cabin

was in the town of Windsor.” This house, built in 1830, was quite rundown, but her mother loved it. Kay explains that they “kind of rearranged it inside, trying to get it back to the way it was originally.” After studying other early houses in Plainfield, Kay stenciled the living room walls and designed the wood paneling to be installed around the fireplace.



In the spring of Kay’s second year of high school, her father, who worked for the Union Carbide Company, was transferred from Ohio to Scarsdale, New York. Kay moved east with her parents, but Betty remained in Lakewood, living

with friends so that she could finish high school in Ohio.

Like her sister before her, Kay enrolled in the College of Wooster in Ohio after graduating from high school. It was unusual for girls to go to college in those days. Even though her father was a university graduate, he thought, “What’s the point in educating two girls?” But her mother insisted that both of her daughters would go to college. She was determined that they would have the chance she had not had. Betty went on to

graduate from the College of Wooster, but Kay dropped out after a couple of years: “Really, it wasn’t fulfilling to me, what they made me take.” Only two courses were the least bit interesting to her, psychology and philosophy. And she was quite sure that she didn’t want to be a schoolteacher, which seemed to be the only career option for female graduates of Wooster. Kay had other plans for the future.

From childhood, she had been artistic, perhaps inheriting some of this talent from her parents.² Her father liked to draw and paint in his spare time, and her mother painted with watercolors. When Kay started thinking about art school, she considered a number of programs, finally choosing Parsons School of Design in New York City “because they had a school in Paris, and I thought, ‘Maybe I’ll get over to Paris.’” Like other decisions Kay has made later in life, her decision to go to Parsons—and she makes it very clear that it was *she*, not her parents, who chose—was not guided solely by self-interest. It is true that she chose this school because of its program in Paris, but this choice also benefited her parents because the tuition was much lower than it had been at Wooster. When Kay began the three-year program in art and architecture at Parsons, her father gave her a special gift—his artist’s kit, made in Germany, filled with beautiful art supplies separated by wooden dividers. Although some of the pieces have gotten lost over the years, Kay still has this kit.

In her second year at Parsons, there was an opportunity for some students to study in Paris. Several of her classmates convinced their parents to let them go, but Kay’s relatives in Ohio were horrified. They told her mother: “Don’t you let her go to Paris. She’ll never come back the same girl!” Fortunately, Kay’s parents were more broadminded. The son of one of their good friends was studying at the Sorbonne, which they saw as a helpful connection. Her father also contacted a man in his company’s Paris office and asked him to keep an eye on Kay. And so in 1934, Kay sailed to France to achieve her dream of “a season in Paris.” As she thinks back on this experience more than seventy years later, her language is effusive. It was “marvelous,” “wonderful,” “fantastic.” This experience, she says, “was really the beginning of my education, even though I’d had some college before that.” One of the effects of her time in France as a

² Artistic talent has been passed down to both of Kay’s children. Her daughter, Susan, does beautiful drawings of horses, birds, and other wildlife, and her son, Tris, is a well-known architect.

young woman was the way it sparked her interest in history: “The history part of Paris was really important. This was the beginning of my great interest in history of all kinds.” And this is an interest that has lasted. At the time of this interview, when Kay was 94, she explains, “Like even right now I collect magazines and articles on the study of the Near East, their tribes and so forth.” In fact, Kay, whose vision is still excellent, continues to read widely and often passes along articles of interest to her friends in town.

Back in the 1930s, after returning from Paris, Kay continued her studies at Parsons. There were plans to start another art and design school in Montreal, and the director of the Paris school, a woman named Peg Wilkerson, chose Kay to work as her assistant. She traveled to Montreal, where she taught interior architecture, emphasizing the different periods in Italy, France, and England. This experience was a revelation: “Peg Wilkerson was a wonderful, wonderful woman, and I learned a great deal from her.” Peg had a colorful history. She had grown up “in the Wild West,” the daughter of an unsuccessful farmer who later tried his hand at prospecting for gold. Eventually, Peg came east to attend Simmons College in Boston and then lived in Paris for quite a while before going to Montreal. For Kay, “She was like another mother.” From her, she learned “how people lived in society.” Kay also learned a great deal from working with students: “I tell you, you learn much more teaching than you do as a student.” The classroom experience was supplemented with study in Europe, and so Kay “got abroad a second time,” this time to Italy.

After her time in Montreal, she worked for a year or two for a woman named Mrs. Franklin, who had started a school of architecture and interior design on Madison Avenue in Manhattan. Kay was in charge of doing the year-end displays of the students’ annual projects.

Her experiences as an art student and young teacher are pivotal events as Kay looks back on her long life. It’s hard for us in the twenty-first century, when girls often participate in study-abroad programs or summer vacations roaming through foreign lands, to imagine just how unusual Kay’s experiences in the early 1930s were at this time. In this era, as Kay expresses it, “You grew up knowing that, as a girl, housekeeping and cooking was number one.” And Kay did fulfill these expectations after her marriage in 1938 at age 25 to Tristram Walker Metcalfe, Jr. Her wedding photos show a young

woman in a stunning satin gown designed by Gabrielle Romanov, a Russian émigré who had started an atelier in Paris. Although Kay went on to have a traditional and happy marriage, she was never a traditional woman of her era. From childhood on, she forged her own way forward. She knew then, as she knows now, that she is responsible for her own life and that she will “make it out on [her] own.”

Marriage and Motherhood

Kay was introduced to Tristram Metcalfe by a friend who went to high school with him in Yonkers, New York. Tristram (known to friends and family as Tris) was in the first graduating class of this school, named Roosevelt High School, which his father had helped to start. Later, while serving as the first President of Long Island University (LIU), his father also started the C.W.

Post campus of LIU. Tris and Kay dated for quite a while before getting married; she explains that their long engagement was due in part to the Depression of the 1930s. Tris, who had majored in English literature at Dartmouth, couldn't find a job. As Kay bluntly put it, “Majoring in English doesn't prepare you for anything,” though she did enjoy reading many of the books her husband had studied in college. Eventually, with a recommendation from her father, Tris accepted a job with Union Carbide, the company he worked for until his retirement.



After their marriage in 1938, Kay devoted herself full time to marriage and motherhood. These were still Depression years, and she “skimped” everywhere she could, turning Tris’s collars and cuffs, darning his socks: “It was *frugal, frugal, frugal*,” an adjective that still describes Kay’s approach to housekeeping.

The young couple first lived in Massachusetts, where their daughter, Susan, was born in 1941 on Maple Street in Springfield. By the time their son, Tristram—later dubbed Terry for Tertius (Tristram W. Metcalfe the Third)—was born in 1943, the company had transferred them to Long Island. At first they lived in Kew Gardens, Queens, but a few years later, they moved into the Metcalfe family home at 21 Puritan Avenue in Yonkers. Kay’s adult children have fond memories of growing up in this elaborate, three-story house, but it was a lot for Kay to care for. Her mother-in-law, speaking from experience, had warned her: “Kathryn, this house is going to kill you.” For the most part, Kay handled the cooking and housekeeping on her own but would sometimes hire a maid, recommended by one of the neighbors, for special occasions: “It was an off and on thing.”

Looking back on this period, Kay says, “We had a wonderful family life. We really did.” She explains that she was “pretty strict” with the children, but when things got difficult, “Tris put his foot down, and they knew he meant it!” The couple had an active social life with a congenial group of friends. They often played bridge and met once a month with a group of other couples: “Each time you had to come dressed in a different costume because each month had a different theme.”

Kay and Tris had hoped for more children, but that was not to be. Her son, Terry, when he was just “a little tiny tot,” said to her, “Why don’t you have some more babies?” She explained, “I tried. It didn’t work.” She had several miscarriages caused by “that funny blood thing”; she was Rh negative. Kay’s reaction to these miscarriages is typical of how she has handled disappointments throughout her life. She doesn’t fret over what didn’t happen. Since having more children wasn’t possible, she let it go without regrets. In the interview she expressed her attitude in a strong voice, “I’m glad we only had two.”

The Working Years

Today, so many years later, Kay has a close relationship with both her children. Yet she didn’t talk much about her philosophy of childrearing or the concrete details of the children’s early years in our interviews, and I didn’t press her to elaborate on these subjects. She did, however, seem eager to talk about her life after the children were out of the house and attending college. At this stage of her life, she became restless. She

remembers saying to her husband, “Tris, I’ve got to *do something!* And there isn’t anything I can do. *Nothing* I can do.” Many of the women in her community were active in church-sponsored activities, “little groups who’d read books or make quilts, things of that nature.” Now that she had more time, she knew that the church or some women’s club would be eager for her talent and energy. “If they say, ‘Would you do this?’ and they can’t find anybody else to do it, I’ll probably do it. And I *don’t want* that to happen to me.” Her tone of voice was emphatic as she spoke these words.



As she tells it, her husband, who held several important leadership positions in the community, including the presidency of the Yonkers Public Library, came to her rescue, saying, “Well, I think they could use somebody to help at the Crestwood Library.” Kay was excited about this possibility: “They knew I was kind of artistically inclined so they asked me to do their bulletin boards. Each month they would specialize in a certain category of books, and I was to create the displays.” A few years later, the library administrators moved her to the brand-new Will Library, which was a much bigger and more modern facility with large display cases. “The only way I could do anything that big was to cut it out of paper. I would make a little drawing, maybe I’d copy a figure from a magazine advertisement. Then when I cut it out, I would sort of proportion it.”

As Kay talked about this work, her voice became animated, revealing how much the opportunity to use her artistic talents in the world outside her home meant to her. It was also much appreciated by the library staff and patrons. “Everybody in the library became really fond of me. And people would come to the library just to see what I’d done.” She takes pride in the fact that she “got along well with everyone in the library” and mentions, in particular, a black woman who was hired as the director of the Brooklyn library and who became a special friend. Kay described the discrimination this woman and her husband faced when they tried to buy a small house next to a Protestant church in upstate New York but were prevented by the local residents. In Kay’s opinion, this was “just awful.” Kay’s views on race relations, as on many other subjects, were more open,

less prescribed than those of others in her community at the time. She remembers a remark she once made in a conversation with her friend: “It probably won’t happen in your time or my time. But the time will come when people will be glad to have a little black blood in them.” Things have changed so much regarding attitudes toward people of color that it’s hard to realize what an unusual view this would have been among white women of Kay’s generation. But I suspect that Kay’s flexibility and open-mindedness on a variety of subjects may help to explain why she has been able to cope so well as an elderly person in a rapidly changing world.

Retirement

Kay’s job with the library system lasted for seventeen years, but when her husband retired at age sixty-five in 1977, Kay, who was the same age, decided to step down as well. She soon embarked on a new project that was “kind of fascinating.” One of her grandfathers, Mathias James Dilger, had enlisted at age 20 as a soldier in the Civil War. He served as a bugler, fought in major battles, was captured, and ended up in the southern prison at Andersonville. He eventually escaped and made it back home. Kay’s mother had 16 of his Civil War letters as well as the diaries he kept during the war. As Kay became interested in this story, she sent away for his “everyday papers,” which enabled her to find out “where he was every day for years.” Kay made a map of his travels during the war, and then she and Tris had an idea: “Why don’t we follow this map?” The trip took three weeks. They photographed every place he had been, and when they returned, Kay put together a book that included copies of his writings, and a narrative of his travels during the war. She made this compilation before the era of computers or desktop publishing, but she found someone in Northampton, Massachusetts, named Streeter who could bind the book. It is an important piece of family (and national) history and is treasured by Kay and her family to this day.

The way in which Kay initiated and carried through this retirement project illustrates another thread that runs throughout her life—her strong sense of agency. When she has an idea, she doesn’t sit around waiting for things to happen. She knows what she wants, and she knows how to make it happen. At one point, Kay and I were talking about how the expectations for women have changed so much during her lifetime. I asked

whether she had ever felt discriminated against because she was a woman, either in education or a job. She thought for a long time and then said, in a small voice, “I don’t think so. . . . I just figured that I wasn’t doing anything so terribly different. And I thought whatever I’m doing is going to fit in with the regular social surroundings.” Kay does not feel that her life has been constrained by growing up at a time when the opportunities for women were limited. Somehow, at least in the retrospective telling of her life, she feels that she was able to find a way to set goals and achieve them, perhaps short-circuiting a system that was not in her favor.

In *Writing a Woman’s Life*, Carolyn G. Heilbrun sees an essential problem in the fact that, at least before the second half of the twentieth century, most women, even the most noteworthy of women, did not have access to “the quest narrative,” a template that often provided a structure for men’s lives, at least as the adventure was retold in biographies and autobiographies. In contrast, women, even famous women but also “women unlikely to ever have a book written about them” (Katha Pollitt as quoted in Heilbrun, p. xvii), were seen to be lacking this type of agency in creating a life for themselves. Commenting on autobiographies written by women, Heilbrun writes, “Identity is grounded through relation to the chosen other. Without such relation, women do not feel able to write openly about themselves; even with it, they do not feel entitled to credit for their own accomplishment” (24). Their lives were seen to have meaning primarily through their connection to others, usually male others, not because of the course they charted for themselves.

Certainly, Kay Metcalfe has lived a traditional woman’s life in many ways, conforming to the expectations of the society of her time and stepping out of the workforce for many years to devote herself to marriage and family. But as she looks back, she also conveys a strong sense that, although she may have had support from others, she has remained in control of her own life at certain key junctures. Perhaps if she were writing her own autobiography, the tale would be different, but the writings she has done in her ninth decade suggest otherwise. In her writing, as in these interviews, Kay makes it clear that she has always felt in control of her own life.

During the years of retirement, Kay and Tris continued to come to Plainfield for vacations. These were also the years when she took up a new hobby. Knowing that Kay

was artistic, a friend encouraged her to try the traditional New England craft of tole painting on household objects. At first she dismissed the idea as “not my style.” But when she finally tried it, she discovered a new passion. As she described the process, the pride and excitement in her voice made it sound almost like alchemy: “First you get your varnish on, you have to wait until it gets tacky. Then you get your stencil, which you cut with either a scissors or a knife, and you lay it on. And then you put on the bronze powders. You tap it on with a piece of velvet. Then you pick up the stencil. ‘Oh, wow! Isn’t that marvelous?’ ”

For Kay, tole painting ties together two of her lifelong interests—decorative arts and history. She explains

that the old metal trays and other household objects, which were painted mostly between 1810 and 1850, were decorated by itinerant stencilers who traveled around the countryside as people were moving from the Boston area to western



Massachusetts. Eventually, the designs were collected by an organization called the Historical Society of Early American Decorators, which documented the designs and made them available to artists like Kay. Over the years, her skill in tole stenciling became well known in Plainfield, and she often exhibited her work in local venues. For Kay, as for the other women I have interviewed, serious involvement in the creative arts has been a source of continuing engagement and sustenance, a way of finding continued purpose and involvement, during the elder years.

Kay and her husband were enjoying their retirement years, socializing with friends and traveling back and forth between New York and Plainfield. Then in 1988, Tris had a cerebral hemorrhage and had to be hospitalized at a facility in White Plains, New York, for several months. It was hard for Kay to talk about this painful part of her

life, and as she searched for the words to describe her husband's illness, she said, "Isn't it funny? They say that people have trouble remembering some of the things that really disturb them." During these months, Kay visited Tris at the hospital every day and fed him all his meals. He wouldn't let anybody else do that.

Finally, when he was discharged, they went home to the big house in Yonkers, but Kay was told she'd need a good deal of help to care for him at home, and the stairs were a major problem. She began to think about moving to the farmhouse in Plainfield: "It's all on one floor. And I could get Tris into a car without going outdoors. So I decided to sell the house in Yonkers." This was clearly a difficult decision for Kay. But once she and her husband were relocated, her typical optimism reasserted itself: "I never really let myself think that he wasn't going to get better." She drove him around town, took him to church, tried to help him walk. Tris's illness lasted for about ten years, from 1988 until his death in 1997. During this time, Kay put her optimism into practice: "These things happen in life, and you have to cope with them the best you can. I believe whatever happens to humankind and everything else on this earth, you have to take in your stride. I'm emotional about things, but I'm not overly emotional. I don't care for it when people fall apart emotionally."

I've often wondered exactly what Kay meant by saying that she was "emotional but not overly emotional." I think her friends might be surprised to hear her say this. They know her as a warm and outgoing person, always thinking of others and interested in what they are doing. But, she seems to be saying here, it's important not to be overcome by emotion in times of trouble. She tries to accept whatever comes in life—the bad as well as the good—and to keep going without falling apart.

During the last three years of Tris's life, he was clearly getting worse. When the end was near, Kay informed her children. Terry was living nearby in Windsor, and Sue flew in from California. On February 7, 1997, Tris passed away at home at the age of 84. The details are clear in Kay's mind:

I stood there wringing my hands, and the man from the funeral parlor said, "I really think it would be best if you stepped out of the room." And so I did, and then Sue and Terry were with me. They were putting him in a dark blanket that zips up, and the doctor said, "You know, I think she'd really like it that you not zip it over his face." And so they carried him out of the house that way. I was

pleased that the doctor said that.³

Kay's voice was soft and subdued as she recalled this day, remembering the scene, as an artist would: "In my vision, I can see certain pictures." Having been strong for so many years, Kay was strong now. "I think I had accepted the whole idea that he was going to die, so when it happened, it happened. I didn't cry. And I thought that was odd. But I couldn't."

On Her Own

Ten years after her husband's death, Kay was still living in the farmhouse and actively involved in the life of the Plainfield community. This reflection describes Kay as I knew her in 2007:

At around 10 a.m. on a beautiful blue-sky August day, I pull into Kay's driveway to pick her up and take her to my place for an interview. I've brought her some snapdragons from my garden, and she invites me into the house for a few minutes while she finds a place for them. The old farmhouse, which she helped to remodel when her family bought the place, is meticulously clean and neat, furnished with antiques and some of her prized tole paintings. Light streams in through the dining-room windows, illuminating the antique glass displayed on the opposite wall. Outside, birdfeeders hanging from the branches of an old shrub are crowded with birds. Kay takes the flowers and plops them down inside a bowl in the middle of the table. They look perfect, as if a designer had placed them there. Well, I think, a designer *did* place them there.

When we go out to my car, we're greeted by the family cat, who found her way in through the open window. A few minutes later, as we pull into my driveway, Kay says, rather abruptly: "I really don't want to live much longer. I've had a wonderful life, but everything has an end." There is no sense of depression or despair as she says this. She almost sounds cheerful as she acknowledges the inevitable. "I guess as we age, we have to learn to accept things as they come. I've never been very good at that," I muse. Kay, I think, *is* good at it. She takes her life as it comes, not looking back with anger or regret about things that cannot be changed and happy, very happy, about all the things that have gone well. (See Sacks, "My Own Life.")

In 1997, Kay found herself alone after nearly 60 years of marriage. In a book entitled *Vital Involvement in Old Age*, Erik and Joan Erikson describe a study in which

³ Actually it was Tris and Kay's son, Terry, who answered the funeral parlor man's question whether to cover his face or not. Terry remembers saying, "Let his face be open to the sky one last time."

they interviewed a group of people in their eighties and nineties. One of the issues many of these people faced was being alone for the first time in years. Some of them, they found, really liked the alone time while for others it posed a major problem. I asked Kay how she felt about being alone after her husband's death: "It didn't bother me. I knew I had my son; he would come by every day before he went into Northampton, where he worked, so I felt there was always somebody there. I did tray painting and reading. And I knew I would always have friends through the church. But I was pretty much dependent on myself." As an elderly widow living alone for the first time in her life, Kay accepted her new status. Like the little girl who decided she would "make it out on [her] own," she felt secure in being "dependent on [her]self."

I asked Kay if losing her husband changed how she thought about herself. She paused and then said, very softly, "I don't think so." She went on to say that their marriage had been a happy one. She told me that recently one of her grandsons had said: "I never heard you or Granddaddy argue or fight." I asked if she felt she would see Tris again in heaven, letting her know it was fine if she didn't want to answer this question. She replied without hesitation, "I think about that sometimes. And I think if I do, it'll be great. But I'm not counting on it." She laughed.

As Kay recalled these years of living alone, she was "perfectly fine," but her children worried about her. After all she was approaching 90. So, in consultation with her daughter and son-in-law, Kay developed a plan. At some point, Sue and her husband, Larry LaRock, would come to live with her in the farmhouse, which they would eventually inherit. They could have horses here, which was something they both wanted. For the first few years after her husband's death, Kay kept saying, "It's not time for you to come yet." But then, in 2000, she began to see things differently. She told her daughter, "If you're moving here and you're going to have horses, you should come now to get things organized even though I could still live here by myself." And so Sue and Larry moved East to settle in Plainfield.

In many ways, this is an ideal arrangement. Sue works from home but is around to check on her mother, fix meals, and take her to doctor's appointments. Larry was a great help in fixing up the place and taking care of the animals until his death in 2012 after a short illness. Kay's son, Terry, who is an architect with an office in Northampton, lives

nearby in the solar home he designed and built on Windsor Pond. And one of Kay's four grandchildren, Sue's son, Andy Stevens, lives just across the road from her with his family. This arrangement has enabled Kay to maintain her independence while at the same time having her adult children close by to help when she needs them. But, still, there are bound to be tensions and conflicts when parents and adult children live in such close proximity. I asked Kay to talk about this. What is it like, I wondered, to see your children making big life decisions? Is it hard watching your kids do things that maybe you wouldn't do? Her response was spoken very distinctly, with pauses between the words for emphasis: "Well, you just take it. This is the way a single individual has to grope with their own life. Whatever they do, that's it. In the long run, it turns out okay. It really does."

Somehow, I did not find this answer surprising since it reflects a view that seems to guide her whole life. But I continued, "You don't give them advice?" "I almost never do," she said, "because I try to think back to what I did when I was their age, and I realize that I should just let them be." Then she said something I will always remember: "If you aren't happy with it, well, try to be happy with it. And it works out." I had to laugh when she said this, and I echoed her words: " 'If you aren't happy with it, try to be happy with it.' That's a good line." She repeated, as if for emphasis, "It works out in the long run. We're a really happy family."

Kay's Thoughts on Aging

In talking with Kay about aging, I asked what had been the hardest thing for her in recent years. She paused for a moment and said, "One of the most difficult things is that you can no longer *do* the things you used to. You know, like paint or cook or maybe go someplace. But then you get to the place where you think about those things, and you really don't want to do them any more. That's the way I am. It's sort of a gradual change."

She illustrated this change of perspective with an example. A year or so ago, June Persing, a younger friend in town who sensed Kay's frustration at not being as active as she had been, proposed that they sign up for an Elder Hostel tour of historical houses in nearby Williamstown. "We were on a bus, and they took us around to various houses. We

had a grand time!” But recently she decided to pass on a similar activity. She wanted to go “in the worst way, but felt [she] just couldn’t do it.” So instead of bemoaning the fact that she doesn’t have the stamina she used to, she accepts the reality: maybe she doesn’t want to do these things anyway. Unlike some elderly people, Kay doesn’t rail against the limitations of old age. She faces them head on, accepting them without anger or undue frustration.

Kay is fortunate indeed to have enjoyed good health throughout her life, perhaps partly because of her “good genes.” Her mother lived to be 102, and one of her maternal aunts, a remarkable woman, lived to 106. The most serious health challenge she has faced is hearing loss, which she describes as “abominable.” But she has worked hard to come to terms with this difficult situation, consoling herself, as she often does, by looking for the potential benefits: “The hearing loss really is no fun. But maybe—here I go—maybe it’s giving me the chance to drop things I don’t want to do socially. Maybe I’ll read more. And maybe I’ll even write more about the family’s being up here in Plainfield. I’m just not going to worry about whether that means I’m over the hill.” Even in talking about problems that others her age, or younger, would find discouraging, Kay somehow manages to see the bright side.

I wondered, though, if Kay has any regrets as she looks back over her life. And she was quick to respond, “Oh, gosh, yes. Loads!” But I had to laugh when I heard the first thing that came to her mind. She explained that she had had to look after her mother when she was living in a nursing home toward the end of her life. And she remembers her mother saying, “Oh, if only I could have some creamed onions!” Kay is horrified that she didn’t find a way to make this happen: “All I needed to do was to walk over and ask someone, ‘Would you please make my mother some creamed onions?’ But it just didn’t occur to me.”

She feels that she has overlooked a number of things she should have done, most of them in the creamed onions category. But finally she touches on a more serious regret, echoing a subject she had discussed earlier: “I wish I could have understood my sister better, I really do. But it just didn’t work out that way.”

When I asked Kay to talk about some of the things she’s the most proud of about herself, she seemed surprised: “About myself?” She mentioned teaching in the Parsons

program in Montreal and her job designing displays for the library system. She did not mention anything related to marriage or motherhood, which struck me as rather surprising, especially in a woman of her era, who was indoctrinated with the idea that a woman's proper place was in the home. She seemed reluctant and a bit uncomfortable talking about her own accomplishments, which was surprising in a woman as reflective and self-aware as Kay. Coming from my own perspective as a Baby Boomer who has grown up as a member of the so-called Me Generation, I found it odd that Kay hadn't apparently thought about these questions before. Perhaps, I'm beginning to suspect, this is one of the most important ingredients of successful aging, not taking oneself too seriously. For those who don't see themselves as the center of the universe, the contemplation of their own decline and demise may not seem as momentous as it does to the self-obsessed members of my own generation.

This impression was confirmed when I asked Kay a question that the Eriksons had used in their research into successful aging: "How do you want people to remember you?" Kay sounded a bit puzzled and had to pause before answering: "Ah, yes. That. I guess mainly through the offspring." Another pause and then:

I'd like to write about the family history up here and have that remain somehow. And, of course, I have that book that I wrote about the Civil War trip tracing my grandfather's journey. That to me is a thing that remains. I guess also, things that people do, crafts work. My trays will be remembered by somebody, sometime or other. Basically, that's about all I can think of. Oh, yes, I've got my husband's tombstone up in the cemetery. I want my name on that.

I followed up by asking if there was anything about her personality that she would like people to remember, "like when they sit around and tell stories about Grandma." Again, she seemed rather nonplussed by my question: "Oh, I don't know. I wonder how they'll remember me. I'd like for them to remember me as a nice person, the way I remember my grandparents."

What does it mean, I wonder, that a woman as thoughtful and articulate as Kay Metcalfe doesn't seem to have thought about the legacy she wants to leave behind? I realize that characterizing a whole generation with a broad brush as the Greatest Generation or the Me Generation or the Millennial Generation is definitely an exercise in stereotyping and over-simplification. Yet there do seem to be some fundamental

differences in world view and basic psychology between those who lived through the Depression of the 1930s and those, such as myself, who have experienced only affluence, never really lacked for anything in a material sense. Perhaps we Baby Boomers should take a look backward to see what we can learn about successful aging from those who have come before.

As we neared the end of our third interview, I asked in a more direct way what I had been trying to learn in all of our conversations:

Now that I'm in my sixties, I look at people like you and Blanche and Irene, who are doing so well. If I'm lucky and healthy and keep my mental faculties, this is the kind of aging that I would like to have. You women are heroes to me. So what advice would you give me for the next twenty or thirty years?

Without hesitating Kay replied:

I don't think I need to tell you this. Just keep your mind moving. Find a way to stay interested. Do some writing. Whatever you do, keep your mind moving. And if you can't remember things, don't get alarmed. Write it down.

Life as Perpetual Motion

It is significant that Kay immediately mentioned writing as one of the ways to deal with aging since she, more than any of the other women I have interviewed, has consistently used writing throughout her life, and especially in her later years, to reflect on and share with others her thoughts on life and on the aging process.

One of her poems, "MOTION is not Stationary," revised in April 2007, expresses her deepest thoughts on the philosophy she has worked out for herself. In our interview of August 2007, I asked her to read the poem aloud, and then we talked about it. She explained that this writing had been inspired in part by her reading of Walter Isaacson's recently published book *Einstein: His Life and Universe*, which she had borrowed from the Plainfield library. She told me that the line "The impenetrable truly exists" was her adaptation of a quotation in which Einstein explained his views on religion.⁴ According to Kay, "Einstein believed, but not in the way most people do." I asked if she, herself, felt

⁴ The actual quotation from Einstein is: "That which is impenetrable to us really exists. Behind the secrets of nature remains something subtle, intangible, and inexplicable. Veneration for this force beyond anything that we can comprehend is my religion."

this way about religion, and she agreed: “I believe in being religious, and I am. But I probably don’t believe in the way most people do.” She explained that she has gone beyond her original religious training in her beliefs:

The earliest human beings felt religious about certain things—the sky or the sun or whatever. Religion is one of the important things. But we have to try to believe in more than just following rules and regulations. Rules and regulations are good except that you have to use them with common sense and be free of them in certain ways.

She went on to talk about her concept of perpetual motion, a key concept in the poem. She explained that this was something that was often talked about in her early schooling, and it had always intrigued her:

Let’s say if everything was good and everybody followed all the rules and regulations, then there would be no reason to make resolutions about things because everything is already determined. It would stop all your feelings or your talking because everything is already taken care of. It’s permanent. But I think you need the opposite sometimes to make the good work. And the good works because there are many things that are not so good. To me it’s perpetual. I don’t think we can ever have a perfect world as far as human beings are concerned.

This aspect of Kay’s philosophy was surprising to me since I’ve always seen her as such a positive and optimistic person. She confirmed my sense that she is basically optimistic but went on to explain that although wars and killings are terrible, they will always be with us:

It has always been tribe against tribe against tribe because they’ve already made up their own rules and regulations. And if they’re different from somebody else’s, they don’t like it. And maybe they’ll fight over land or things like that. But I think this will go on forever because without it, without that knowledge, there’d be no point in living.

As she said this last part, she laughed and sounded rather apologetic: “I guess I’m not expressing myself too well.” But I was beginning to see what she meant, and actually felt, as Ton Whiteside, the minister of the Plainfield Congregational Church, said recently, that “famous theologians could learn a thing or two from talking to Kay.” In fact, what Kay was saying about the interconnectedness of good and bad resonates powerfully with what Eckhart Tolle, a well-regarded writer and speaker on spiritual life, has to say on the same subject:

Thinking isolates a situation or event and calls it good or bad, as if it had a separate existence. Through excessive reliance on thinking, reality becomes fragmented. This fragmentation is an illusion, but it seems very real while you are trapped in it. And yet the universe is an indivisible whole in which all things are interconnected, in which nothing exists in isolation.

The deeper interconnectedness of all things and events implies that the mental labels of “good” and “bad” are ultimately illusory. They always imply a limited perspective and so are true only relatively and temporarily. (Tolle, p. 196)

As I continued to talk with Kay, I applied her ideas about “good” and “bad” to the concept of aging. I told her that I had been reading a number of popular books related to successful aging, and that at least half of them were not about aging at all but rather about magical formulas for staying young forever:

Rebecca: Americans don’t want to get older, and they don’t want to have any health problems. So they take lots of vitamins and go to special doctors. But you know what? They still do get older. When they’re in their eighties and nineties, they’ve got a lot of problems. And those who were trying to stay young forever might be very discouraged by that. But it seems like it’s part of your philosophy not to fight so much against old age.

Kay: I guess that’s probably it. Everybody has trials and tribulations that meet them one time or another. But you somehow have to decide how you’re going to get through it.

Rebecca: So, perpetual motion. “The balance does not remain stationary” [quoting from Kay’s poem]. Our lives are not going to stay in balance forever.

Kay: [sounding very sure of herself] Equilibrium is a good thing, but you have to reach your equilibrium through bad times.



Amazingly, Kay has managed to pull off this difficult balancing act. In the various transitions of her long life, she has always managed to regain her equilibrium. In its own way, her life has been a process of perpetual motion. She has been sustained by the strong sense of security she experienced as a child and aided by her natural optimism. At every stage, she has re-invented herself, finding new social, creative, and intellectual interests to sustain her. Perhaps, though, “re-invention” is the wrong word. It’s more like a metamorphosis, where she sheds a previous version of the self, giving up the things that are no longer possible but emerging somehow more fully herself. When we look at the accomplished woman of substantial years, we see within traces of the young girl who believed that even if there were questions she could not immediately answer, she would be able to “make it out on [her] own.” Now, at age 103, this process continues for Kay as she plays her own part in the perpetual motion of humankind.

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