

Vicki Reback
Retirement Remarks
(14 December 2006)
by Allen Ashby

Vicki, you'll have to forgive me for reading these remarks. I just discovered last spring, much to my surprise, that I was supposed to have been teaching writing all these years, and that evidently writing is this thing where you actually write words down on a page, and then go back and change them, so that you can try to say what you really mean, what you really feel. It's an amazing thing. Really! And I think now, that's what you've been doing all these years with all those students back there by the window in our office, helping them change their words, to discover what they really want to say, to feel, to mean. I think outside that window, in the real world, we call that therapy. And I only wish I had known about it before, that that is what I was supposed to have done with my life, teach writing, get therapy, but now, since I've discovered what writing is I haven't been able to do anything unless I write it down first, even talking on the phone to my mother. I write down my half of the conversation before I even call her. I mean even these words, *I wrote them down already*. Even, *these*, words. See? Isn't this great? What you've been doing? So, anyway, I wish you had told me sooner. But as I tell my students, better never late.

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Vicki's Dream

There's a picture in our office on the wall above Vicki's desk; it's a picture of Georgia O'Keeffe. Well, it's actually a set of fifteen 32 cent stamps, of a painting called "Red Poppy," although the flowers in the stamps are yellow. There are some things in life I guess I just don't understand, but there's a picture of O'Keeffe with the stamps and a brief saying of hers:

"Nobody sees a flower, really—it is so small—we haven't time,
and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time."

The picture is appropriate, because when we think of Vicki, we think of friendship, and of flowers.

We think of *The Garden*. That's a capital "T," a capital "G."

It is the most beautiful spot on the college campus.

It is a place, a simple space, really, where people come to relax, to find peace, to reestablish, often without realizing it, their connection to themselves and the natural world. They come, they sit, they leave, refreshed, changed, more alive, more aware; themselves.

The Garden, of course, is, what Vicki does, as a teacher. Many of her students have never left. They are still out there in the garden, still weeding, still planting, still putting in the paths. You can often see them there on their knees; it is a form of prayer.

And so there are really two gardens here; there is the garden that is still being created; and the garden the rest of us enjoy. We come to sit and rest, or as we pass by, we glance and get a momentary glimpse of beauty. We admire the flowers, the sculptures, the Japanese rock garden in the back corner; we relax in the gazebo; or linger, walking by it at night when the lights are on. In the spring we marvel when the birds are back in the trees, when the flowers are back in bloom. It truly is a special space; a simple place; the most beautiful spot on the campus.

It's also a life's work, a work of a life's "time", and a living gift to all of us, who are here now, and who will be here a decade from now.

But Vicki's garden began inside, it began first as a classroom; another living space, a space shared with colleagues.

It began in 1977 in N-24, when Dr. Kreisman brought us up out of the basement of the library and into the light. N-24 was also a special place. It was a classroom with sofas. It was painted in vibrant colors. It was a room with cushions, rugs, a coffee pot, and pictures and posters on the walls, many that the students themselves had created. It was a living room, a room to really live in.

Tim and Vicki and I taught there for a while, a decade in fact from 1977-87; sometimes all together, sometimes in pairs, sometimes separately.

Vicki taught her first year courses there,
and
Banned Books
Women in Lit
Myth and Lit
Literature and the Arts

and that room became a center, for a number of outside activities.

We collected clothes and distributed them to
needy families in Appalachia,
and to the homeless though the Lighthouse Temple in Newark;
we collected canned goods and gave them to
food pantries in Elizabeth, Westfield and Plainfield;
we collected newspapers, and had bake sales, and used the money to support two children,
a young girl on the Navaho reservation,
and a young boy in Nepal,
and we supported individuals that we corresponded with who were working for charitable
organizations in places like Thailand and Mozambique.

Later The Garden would sponsor events, and it was The Garden that brought distinguished scholars, a host of Earth Day activities, the folk singer Holly Near, and the poet Alan Ginsburg. Over time The Garden became a place where classes could meet outside, where the walls between inside and outside could temporarily dissolve; and then the Garden became a World Peace site; a simple place, a special space.

We didn't know it at the beginning, but we know it now, looking back, that what Vicki was trying to do in N-24, was to bring the whole world into that classroom, and then take that classroom out, into the world. It was her great gift to students, and to all of us. It was her way, of living, in the world, connected.

But it all began inside, in N-24, and then in 1980, Vicki went out the window, and broke ground, just outside N-24, where she could see the garden from inside the classroom, looking out, and where she could see the classroom from outside, looking in. And each year after that The Garden became a new way of learning. First, it was how to break the ground, what to plant; and then later, which plants liked being next to each other, (and which didn't; sort of like sharing an office in the college, sometimes) and since the plants were originally vegetables, the question became which flowers should she plant along with them, and then where should she put the walkways, and what should she make them of, and what about the sculpture, the bird houses, the peace pole. What are we to do (she used to worry) if they want to spray the trees? What are we to do about the night thieves who keep stealing the sculpture?

Where will we get the money to build the shed, put in the sprinkling system, to put up the gazebo (in 1986); to buy the benches, to maintain and expand the plant and shrub life that is there?

And at the same time Vicki was doing all of this she was also

 serving on a host of faculty and departmental committees,
 attending numerous seminars and conferences around the country
 and participating in the Princeton Mid Career Fellowship program

and then in 1987, she took a sabbatical and traveled around the world. (I happened to be doing the same thing at the same time, and so we agreed to meet up on a beach in Australia and there walking alone, together, on the sands we talked about what the year had meant to each of us so far. She was just coming from Nepal, and I was going there. And Nepal had changed her life. She had met the young boy we had been sponsoring there, but more, Nepal was now a living seed in her soul, first as a way of life for the people who lived there, for her a simple more direct, more connected, way of life, and then still deeper in the soil, it was the place where she would adopt her daughter. It is Mia's first home.

So what we see with the eye, first begins inside.

N-24.

An act of the imagination.

A seed in the soul.

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Over the years Vicki has forced me to read a lot. She keeps doing that to her students as well. She keeps handing me books. “You’ll like this,” she says. And years ago, she was the first person to hand me *The Little Prince*, and so then for years it was a book we both taught. In it, the fox says, “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.”

But we can see the garden, and many students who return to talk to Vicki can still see N-24 in their own mind’s eye; they are still sitting on those sofas, still wrestling with and changing the words, still exploring the ideas, the feelings, the connections, where once in their lives Vicki took the time, to help them see, what was essential, and invisible, and real, to help them feel a part of a community, at home, in the whole world, to know what it feels like to be, at home.

One of the classes we taught together in N-24, was a reunion seminar where we brought back to the college some of our own students who had graduated, and then three years after that class was over, one of those students wrote all of us because he was still wrestling with what that class meant to him, about living, connectedly, with others and the world; but his long letter was more in despair with his own sense of the loss of community in the world, and in his own life, and many of us wrote him back, and then he wrote back again. It was education as a continuing flowering, a garden that returns and renews itself, each spring. Vicki’s garden; her classroom; her life; her life with her students. A simple miracle, of life itself, but like a seed, so small, it sometimes takes time, to see it bud and blossom.

In Vicki’s letter to him, she writes:

So maybe this whole idea of inside and outside will then fall away if, in a way, we are already inside God or the whole and it just keeps opening from within into a larger truth (what I sometimes call “the integrity of the universe”). Two years ago when I saw Carl Jung’s spiritual autobiography and I heard, “all illness (or did he say all psychological illness?) is a manifestation of loss of faith”, it struck me deeply how much broken faith we all had to reclaim with life, and faith for its own sake with no givens to have faith in, as itself the miracle in the mythos of our times. And reclaiming then the ability to trust life and surrender in full presence to what is. This balancing our own “will” with life’s is the same whole maybe. So here again Rilke has stood me for years, “and for the rest, let life happen to you. Believe me, life is right in any case.”

And living in the moment (as George Leonard discussed in his book) with no expectations from the past, letting life really happen and staying open is still a major challenge and pleasure. And still a dream – “Imagine” –

Which leads me into thinking of the Peace Movement – We have yet no positive image of peace. We have always defined it as an absence of war or whatever its opposite is, rather than as itself many things and a way of being. Since I also believe “we can’t live what we can’ conceive” and “most people’s lives are failures of the imagination” (to quote myself), then it is more than ever time to reconceive ourselves and begin to actively cocreate with life our lives and thereby to relive “peace as an active verb.” And although there are so few models or maps by which to navigate our lives (and this is also what we were trying to do together in that class in 84), “we are,” as Adrienne Rich says, “living through a time that needs to be lived through us”. And we can in any moment create new stories for our lives (“the stories of our lives become our lives”). First we need to know the old story (and the old mythos) and then (“Imagine”). Dream a new one. Am I right, Allen, in remembering Shakespeare’s line, “We are such stuff as dreams are made on.” And if as all the great stories tell us, everything begins with a dream, is this how God (or life) gardens with us?

That is Vicki, isn’t it. Gardening God with us, always bringing us back to what is essential, to helping us imagine, dream, reclaim ourselves. That is Vicki, and I know, I know, I speak for all of us, when I say to you, Vicki: “Go in peace. Go, in peace. Go in. In Peace.”

You have gardened us so well, and you are leaving us with so much beauty. You have made us, take the time, to see the flower we can see, and the flowers of friendship, and the flowers of intimacy and memory and dreams, that are often invisible, except to the heart. A red poppy. For what you have given us, is what you are, something so simple, so beautiful, so natural that we, like your students, are changed, forever. Thank you for giving us, your time, this garden of your life. Thank you, for your dreams, for dreaming a while with us. We don’t want to let you go, but you can go, now, in peace. Namaste.