

FIRST THINGS

Karen Novak, 1938–2009

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I almost emailed Karen today. It's just part of how we live now, that electronic tic. There was a story I wanted to tell her, a small knot of thought that had been nagging for weeks and finally had gotten untied in a way that I thought would amuse her. So I tapped the key that would bring up her address, only to realize that this particular story—unlike others we had tossed back and forth during the past year before her death—would have to wait indefinitely. Such is the hypnosis of the Internet, that it can lull us for a split second into forgetting even the otherwise rather singularly unforgettable fact of death.

To many people, including readers of FIRST THINGS, the name Karen Laub Novak is recognizable first as that of the wife and longtime love of one of the great theologians and public intellectuals of our time, Michael Novak. Theirs was “a marriage,” in the words of their longtime friend Hadley Arkes, “sustained by two wings, by faith and reason, nature and art—by the relentless wit and energy of Michael and the genius and deepening sainthood of Karen.” And just as it is impossible for anyone who has known them to imagine Karen apart from Michael, so is it equally impossible to imagine Karen apart from her children. Just how remarkable it would have been to find oneself a child of Karen's was powerfully in evidence at her funeral, especially. As Jana put it with devastating simplicity, “I have spent—and will spend—my life trying to follow her example.”

And there was of course a third essential woman there—this one known as well to the outside world: Karen Laub Novak, the artist. A former student of the expressionist Oskar Kokoshka in Vienna, she went on to create a dazzlingly wide collection of lithographs, paintings, and sculpture, much of it graced with what admirers have identified as Catholic mysticism. Her work has been exhibited all over the country (an especially evocative selection is currently on view through October at the John Paul II Institute at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.). Other works included illustrations for children's books and numerous magazines—the *New Republic*, *Washington Monthly*, and *Crisis* among them. Karen's commissioned art cut a wide swath, from John Paul II on down. Her statue of the Green Revolution

titan and Nobel Prizewinner Norman Borlaug—who died only a few weeks after Karen—has been called by one critic “one of the two most beautiful” statues in North America.

Even this summary does not exhaust the formidable parade of Karens: grandmother, sister, sister-in-law, aunt; domestic mastermind of a couple of homes; volunteer for worthy causes, among them Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington, where she counseled the families of wounded soldiers. She and Michael also presided for years over one of the liveliest dinner tables in conservative Washington—and certainly the warmest. What made those dinners the memorable events they were was not only Karen the hostess but another persona—Karen the intellectual, one who knew the ideas of the day as well as the minds behind them. Her own influences, as she once noted in an essay called “Creativity and Children,” included “Kafka, Dostoevsky, Flannery O’Connor, Bergman, T.S. Eliot, Camus, Asian and South American writers, and such sixteenth-century mystics as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.” It was, she admitted, “a strange group for a cocktail party,” especially when combined with her rural, Catholic, Iowan background. But it certainly made for great stuff both in the Novak dining room and beyond.

And she was also, to many people including me, a dear friend. We visited with each other regularly over the past year of her cancer, after a particular round of tests confirmed that time would be short. Most Wednesday afternoons would find us deep in chat at the Novaks’ home, following any number of storylines simultaneously—families and friends, birth and death, recipes and furniture-store discounts, and much more in the unholy mix of high and low through which women, especially, transition seamlessly. As Susan DeMuth noted: “Friendship with Karen was full of questions. . . . She asked questions about matters divine, about art and creativity, about the best routes around Washington, about medical options, about politics and culture.”

Sometimes we’d be alone and trading confidences about those kinds of things, and other times alone and debating different issues of enormous weight: What exact shade of leafy green would look best on the living-room walls? Was Hugh Laurie more brilliant as his character Gregory House in the television series or as Bertie Wooster in the PBS rendering of P.G. Wodehouse? Even more challenging: Where exactly in the Novak kitchen—an object in a constant state of renovation and replacing—might one find the can opener, the crackers, the latest pile of magazines, the phone? And of course the most eternal question of all: Why do husbands, particularly the bookish, high-minded husbands of the sort we knew, so closely

resemble the famous Collyer Brothers—so determined not to throw anything out that their wives are reduced to standing athwart the toppling rivers of paper, yelling stop?

Many other friends and family traipsed in and out of the Novaks' house during those same months, with Michael's sister Mary Ann presiding over the comings and goings and adding so much to the entertainment and amusement of Karen. The trinity of those Novaks—Michael, Karen, and Mary Ann—handled the influx of visitors with impeccable grace. On any given day one might catch one family member or another in the house, or Joan Weigel strolling in with a casserole, or Jana's friend Brenna with some extra time to help organize things, or JoAnne Kemp or Robyn Krauthammer or Kristie Hassett or who knows how many others popping by for one reason or another only to linger in the happy mayhem of the house.

A couple of times I brought our youngest daughter, age seven, for whom chez Novak and especially Karen's studio and artistic implements amounted to a magic kingdom of its own; Karen that first day gave this daughter an art set that she has proudly used and reused ever since.

Also on any given day, a carpenter or plumber or electrician or other workman would likely pass through tinkering with something, because Karen treated the house as one would expect an artist to—as a perpetually unfinished work in progress. Few workers managed to get out without having at least some significant fraction of their life stories ferreted out, for Karen was an empath of the first order. Nothing seemed to fascinate her more than every human being put in her path.

On it went in their home in the year before she died, the whole place less like a house with a death threat hanging over it than an ongoing party in desperate need of phone-finders and a revolving door. Sometimes Michael would come home early and join in, giving guests an excuse for a late-afternoon drink (in the last months Karen had to forgo such treats because of her medicine). I remember one raw winter afternoon when Michael came in from a trip to a roaring fire that Karen had set in the living-room fireplace—Karen did everything herself, cancer or no, though how much of that was Norwegian self-sufficiency and how much a clear understanding of the incompetence of others was hard to tell. That afternoon Michael introduced me to that fabulous elixir, the Manhattan, as we sat and heard from him the details of the event he'd been traveling back from—and this happened to be Richard John Neuhaus' funeral.

In sum, being Karen Novak meant being at the center of a whirlwind that would have

exhausted many a healthy woman in her prime, let alone one being battered from within by at least two different kinds of cancer and all the stress and side effects that the medical regimen entailed. Yet her work never ceased, whether in her house or in the wider world. Right up till the eleventh minute of the eleventh hour of her illness, she was still taking in concerts, plays, dinners, and lectures at a stage when any ordinary mortal would have taken to the sofa and stayed there.

Some eighteen years earlier, diagnosed with cancer as a mother of teenagers, Karen had been given six months to live—a guess that proved wonderfully wrong. That experience was no doubt the crucible in which the extraordinary grace and courage of her last year—remarked upon by all commentators public and private—were forged. It is also an odd and true fact that, for all her suffering, Karen remained a beauty. A gamine blonde with dazzling blue eyes and great flair for color, as a lovely photo from *Washingtonian* magazine once captured particularly well, she was the only truly sick person I ever saw whose beauty was honed by illness. It was as if she had become one of her own human portraits, taut as a bow—only, in her, that tautness had none of the visible tensions of, say, her artistic meditations on Rilke and Eliot and so many other dark and recalcitrant artistic forces. It seemed more to reveal what she herself once described as “that inner landscape within us that is often veiled, even from our-selves . . . full of life, struggle, endurance, and stubbornness.” And that landscape was one beautiful place.

I was walking with our seven-year-old down a quaint street on a brilliant August day—as it happened, in the same seaside town where Karen and Michael had spent many happy times, and with the same child to whom Karen had given the art set—when Mary Ann Novak called with the news. I shut the phone and kept walking. “Mommy?” came the inevitable question, alongside the inevitable tug on the sleeve. “Mommy, what’s wrong?” *Mommy’s sad*. “Why are you sad?” *It’s our friend Mrs. Novak. She’s gone*. “What do you mean gone, Mommy? Did she die?” *Yes, she died*. “But Mommy!” came the imperious voice. “Don’t cry! Don’t you do that! Because Mrs. Novak was such a nice lady!”

Because Mrs. Novak was such a nice lady. It took weeks to figure out why those childish words stuck so, why they seemed to demand more inspection than they got at the time, but I finally did. Just look at the radical causality they imply: *I’m crying because she was such a nice lady*, is what the adult would have said; in other words, *she was nice, therefore I cry*. But the purer mind of seven turns up something deeper. *She was nice; therefore you shouldn’t cry*, came her challenging response.

Is it possible? Do children actually know things we don't, see things we no longer can, perhaps even intuit heaven? That was the story I almost sent to Karen's email account. After all, she's the one who pointed out, in the essay on creativity mentioned earlier, that "the very young, healthy child has a heightened perception" and that "I've seen qualities in them and in their friends I would like to recover myself." How I wish I could know what she would have made of the story—that and a thousand or so other things that won't be the same without getting to share them with her.

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