

A Celebration of the Life of Nell Whitman

March 24, 1966 – November 25, 2021



Carnegie Center for Literacy and Learning
Lexington, Kentucky

December 18, 2021

Program

Welcome	<i>Cristina Crocker & Ellen Crocker</i>
Remembrance (virtual)	<i>Penelope Whitman</i>
Abide With Me	<i>Sung together, music and lyrics in program</i>
Reading (virtual)	<i>Beth Robbins</i>
Remembrance	<i>Helena Shobole (with family)</i>
Remembrance	<i>Andy Shubin</i>
Remembrance (virtual)	<i>Evelyn Begay</i>
Remembrance	<i>Ahenewa El-Amin & Nathan Spalding</i>
Slideshow	<i>"I Know I Been Changed" sung by Margaret Kimble</i>
Closing	<i>Bob Sandmeyer</i>

Abide with Me

(Tune "Eventide")

William Henry Monk (1823-1889)

arranged Jim Paterson

1. A - bide with me: fast falls the e - ven - tide;
2. Swift to its close ebbs out life's lit - tle day;
3. I need Thy pres - ence ev - ery pass - ing hour;

5

The dark - ness deep - ens; Lord, with me a - bide!
Earth's joys grow dim, its glo - ries pass a - way;
What but Thy grace can foil the tempt - er's power?

When oth - er help - ers fail and com - forts flee,
Change and de - cay in all a - round I see.
Who, like Thy - self, my guide and stay can be?

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Help of the help - less, O a - bide with me.
O Thou who chang - est not, a - bide with me.
Through cloud and sun - shine, Lord a - bide with me.

Eleanor McCormick Whitman

Nell came into the world in New York City, March 24, 1966, the left-handed, right-brained, less hurried of (unanticipated!) girl twins. The morning of her surprise arrival, her father Ray's economics doctoral class at Columbia was diverted into a discussion of economies of scale of the birth of multiples. Her mom Eleanor simply practiced them, nursing the two babies at once, rescuing time for her elder daughter Penelope, herself, and her other great love, books. Work in publishing had given Eleanor an appreciation of not just words, not just stories, but books. That love was catching: Eleanor's namesake Nell would become an avid reader, an English teacher and a poet. Her core self was something more elemental: a humanist. In this she had many teachers but specially her godmother, Margaret Kimble.

A move to University Park, Maryland couldn't quite shake the New Yorker out of the Eleanors, though living in a once-oak forest lent another sort of beauty to their days. Nell and her sisters played hide-and-seek amidst azalea blossoms and, come winter, piled one atop another on their Flexible Flyers, the better to catapult down the snowy streets of their neighborhood. School was a walk away. Weekends found the family on Capitol Hill in D.C. for an infusion of the urban and the life of the spirit at St. Mark's Church. The gendered space of Girl Scouts—baking campfire cakes in suburban parks?!—

and cotillion—ballroom dancing for debutantes?!—set the stage for rebellions to come. Holidays meant Amtrak-ing to see Margaret in Manhattan or ice skating with Uncle Rich in the Poconos or beach camping with friends in Assateague. Summers were for music camp and, best of all, Maine: a cabin surrounded by fir trees and blueberry bushes, rocky islands on the horizon and bracing swims through swirling kelp, plus a gorgeous little library full of well-thumbed, color-plated editions of children's books.

By junior high, Nell was both a teacher's aide and a people gatherer. In high school, she began tutoring and cemented a friend group who stood by her all her life. Theirs was a big, public school with students from all over the world. Her first tutee was Cambodian, her first internship at the Department of Education. Her first overseas trip was a visit home with the family's Bolivian housemate to a tiny town on the Amazon River in Brazil. Nell joined AFS, an international exchange program, which sent her to the Dominican Republic for a second senior year in Santiago de los Caballeros. She returned from the island nation with a love of merengue, papaya and concón (the crunchy rice at the bottom of the pot) but most of all her Dominican friends and host family.

Middlebury College in Vermont seemed a cloister after life in the D.R. Nell transferred to George Washington University,

riding D.C. buses from her group house on Capitol Hill to finish her degree in humanities. While working alongside her sister Penelope in a bookshop in Georgetown, she met her life partner Bob Sandmeyer, a student of philosophy and classics at G.W. What to do but surrender to the pull of the old world? They socked money away until they could spend a year together scouring Europe from the tip of Portugal to western Turkey, then south to Israel.

Home again in D.C., Nell worked in international exchange and Red Cross blood-banking and Bob at the Nature Conservancy. They married at St Mark's on the Hill in 1993, honeymooning in Patagonia. Their explorations of the Rockies continued in graduate school, criss-crossing the mountains between Fort Collins, Colorado, where Bob studied environmental ethics and Nell teaching, and Paonia, a singular town on the Western Slope where Nell taught English and Spanish and drama. In the shadow of Mt Lamborn, Nell gave birth to their first daughter Sophia.

Then the East called them back: doctoral studies in philosophy for Bob at the University of Kentucky and teaching for Nell. The family reluctantly left the West and fast friends, and made life anew in Lexington, where they were graced by Lucy's birth. Happily, Nell's sister Penelope was living in Lexington with her husband Kevin, her step-son Brooks and their son Franklin. The

cousins grew up together. In good time, the subtler beauties of Kentucky revealed themselves in good time: riding horses in the Bluegrass, apple picking, hikes through rhododendrons in the Gorge, swims in the Kentucky River, the fiery autumn colors and sparkle of ice storms in the maple trees, long walks in the re-wilding meadows on Hisle Farm. As ever, it was the people--students and colleagues, neighbors, and friends, who inspired her with their commitment to family, to community, to place. They, together with Bob and their inimitable daughters, made her life in Kentucky sing. But interactions with strangers fortified her too: Nell learned the life story of everyone she met in seconds flat and carried them with her.

This broad curiosity about the world made forays away from home a lifeline: a year in Heidelberg, Germany, when their girls were small and Bob was researching phenomenology; time with her twin and her partner Louis in San Francisco and Virginia Beach. Trips to the Sierra Nevada, Big Bend, Morocco, Mexico, Taos, and New York City. Time with her mom on Orrs Island, in London, Siena, Quogue. With family and friends from Atlanta to Window Rock, State College to Capitola, England, Germany, and just weeks ago, in Aix-les-Bains and Rome.

Ever the humanist, Nell taught a little bit of everything at every level in Fayette County Schools from Florence Crittenton School for pregnant teens to the Liberal Arts Academy at Henry Clay.

Trailed by a cascade of papers, her laugh brightening the halls, she worked to inspire a love of language, of learning, and of intercultural understanding. In later years, Kentucky gave her a gift, a scholarship to pursue a literature masters at the Bread Loaf School of English. Thanks to two summers drinking in beauty and books in Oxford's Bodleian Library, two reveling in New Mexico's landscapes in Santa Fe, and one in Vermont, Nell's poet self emerged.

Some people thrive and create in solitude. Not Nell. In motion, with some quiet and some chaos, much beauty, local food, a proper cappuccino, abundant sunlight and most of all people all around her, Nell shone like no other.