

Appreciation of Estelle Winthrop, at her death in 1998

It would be all too easy, especially today and among my generation, to under-value Estelle Winthrop's life. She boasted no worldly accomplishments: she never had a job, much less a career; she didn't have a successful marriage. She did, however, give many hours to charity when she was able; and before her eyes began to fail, she excelled at her hobby, knitting.

Mother was uneducated; she did not read weighty books or talk about big ideas. She had little interest in politics, and the opinions she voiced were often so unconnected to one another and to her life as to be a source of amazement to a political scientist. But she had a keen mind when she determined to use it. She played a mean game of bridge, a skill she taught to my sister, mostly in the middle of August and September nights, when Donna's asthma kept her awake. Mother was awake because her child was.

Mother was never a gregarious person, and late in life, not always gracious. She was proud and reserved, though polite. She did not make friends or even acquaintances easily; but the friends she did have had lasted a lifetime and she cared about them deeply. She was not given to facile expressions of compassion, but she was genuinely loyal.

My mother devoted her life to her family; her family was her life. There are many worse ways to spend one's life, and in truth, very, very few better ways. My mother made it possible for four people to know that they were the most important people in the world, at least to someone. When her parents became ill, Mother spared no effort to enable them to continue to live with a maximum of security, dignity, and privacy. Her children were, as children go, relatively easy. We inherited or learned to imitate her stubbornness and expressed it partly as self-reliance.

Mother's concern for us often appeared to me as petty tyranny: telling someone at every opportunity that her last haircut was too short, instead of letting nature take its course, is not an endearing manner. But when it came to the things that really mattered – my choosing a career she thought would make me unhappy, my not marrying until I was 32 and then to a man who wasn't Jewish, our giving her no grandchildren – about these things she made her opinions known and then, with remarkable restraint or resignation, she kept her doubts to herself, for the most part.

Had there been anything Mother could not do out of love, she would have done it out of a sense of duty. My mother personified moral integrity. I did not always agree with the content of her judgments, to be sure, and I was often unconvinced by the reasons she gave for them when I argued with her; but I did admire her moral certitude. She knew that some things were rights, others always wrong; right was to be done, no matter how unpleasant or inconvenient. I cannot even remember her ever having to urge us to do as she said, not as she did. (True, neither Donna nor I put her to the ultimate test by taking up smoking.) The world depends on people like my mother; we take them for granted. I have learned to treasure what she was, and now I shall remember her.