

Christina Looper Baker

In a Generous Spirit

A First-Person Biography of Myra Page

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Finding Love

I was invited to the University of Minnesota for the fall of 1923. Instead, I stayed home recovering from a kidney infection. I had gone boating with friends on the river, and our boat got stuck on a sandbar. We got soaking wet getting out of the boat and had to stay on the sandbar all night until the water rose. Someone in the town phoned our parents so they wouldn't be too worried. I was menstruating at the time and got chilled; the cold settled on my kidney and gradually affected my heart. For three months I stayed in bed, unable to eat solid food.

At first the doctors thought I had nephritis. My kidneys quit functioning temporarily, but we didn't realize it. I was determined to keep going. One night my lungs filled up, and I began to cough. My room was right next to my parents', so my mother heard me and awakened my father. Had she not done so, I probably wouldn't be here. Daddy got another doctor, and they pumped my lungs empty and made me throw up. I was black and blue on my hips for a long time from the injections of digitalis. The kidney infection could have been fatal, but good care and my strong constitution pulled me through.

After recovering, I worked with the Newport News YWCA on a volunteer basis, trying to teach about unions. I talked about what the unions had meant for the country. If the local girls would wake up, I believed they would learn. Newport News had many foreigners, and some local residents feared that they would take over. The day I was voted in as a member of the Y board, one woman talked about keeping Canadians and other nationalities out. A friend on the board told me she hoped I wouldn't resign right away because of such narrow-mindedness. Anna Thompson, another friend connected with the YWCA, was interested in union organizing. I felt we made a little headway.

While at home that year, I made the final break with Russell. He still wanted to retire young from the navy and build us a beautiful home up on the James River. I had already accepted the invitation to Minnesota, and it wasn't right to continue the relationship with him. When I finally told him my decision, he went to my mother and cried on her shoulder. Not long afterwards, I was playing the piano when Mama came downstairs saying, "Come over here. I want to talk to you." She chided me about Russell, and I strongly reproved her. "Not that it's not any of your business, but Russell and I have to decide this," I said. "You're just going to make it harder for him and harder for me." I was too weak and confused to break with him earlier. I've always felt guilty about that.

Margaret Barrett, Russell's mother, was disappointed when I didn't marry Russell. At the same time, she was enough of a woman not to want me to marry him unless he was the right one. She told me to think the matter over very carefully. "Russell tells you that you can keep up your work, but that's not the way it's going to be," she said. "If you marry, you're going to have children right away and get tied up. You'll either get a divorce from him or something will happen; it won't work out." She was a wise woman.

I wasn't consciously aiming for marriage. My mother thought I would never get married. It was part of my ambivalence that I wanted to have a home, a husband, and children and at the same time I wanted a career. I didn't see how it was going to work out. Emily Gardner was certain that you couldn't do both. In college she broke her engagement to ministerial student Huntley Gaines. "How can I work in my career if I'm married?" she asked. "You have to make up your mind—either a career or marriage." I still thought you might have both, but Emily never did. She went on to New York for graduate work at the famous Presbyterian Hospital connected with Columbia and became a pediatrician.

The breakup was quite tragic for Huntley Gaines because he loved Emily very much. Later he married one of our closest friends, Elizabeth Ellyson, when they were both at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Kentucky.¹ Elizabeth invited me to be a bridesmaid in her wedding. Strangely enough, she also invited Emily. Elizabeth wore a traditional bride's dress, and we wore pale pink bridesmaid dresses. (My mother made mine.) We all looked alike, and we all got a little silver spoon from Elizabeth. That was the tradition.

It's strange how mixed up those relationships were. Elizabeth knew that she was Huntley's second choice because Emily was the one he really loved. Henry Decker, the husband of Florence Boston, used to tease Elizabeth: "I know you're jealous of Emily." Henry was generally a nice man

(he became a doctor and supported integration in the South long before it was acceptable), but sometimes the southern male sense of humor takes its peculiar turns. Elizabeth was what my father would call a good sport about it. She made some adjustment to her situation but not enough and remained jealous of Emily until she died.

In the spring of 1924, I returned to New York to work as a substitute teacher. I got a job in Teaneck, New Jersey, teaching American history. You couldn't get a teacher's license until you had taught a certain length of time, so I was considered a substitute even though I taught full-time. The system made a lot of money by paying substitute wages for full-time teaching. The school principal was a theoretical socialist and a nice guy who was good with the teachers. He didn't know I was a radical or I would have been fired, even though he needed teachers. I joined the New York City Local of the American Federation of Teachers and quickly became one of its leaders.

In the fall of 1924, I entered the University of Minnesota as a teaching fellow in the Department of Sociology. Minnesota pioneered in teaching fellowships for women. Of the seven or eight graduate teaching fellows in the sociology department, three were women. We took courses for free and earned six hundred dollars a year teaching. I taught introductory sociology and social statistics to Minnesota students from farming and working families, many of whom were getting an education to make a career for themselves.

Sociology was quite the coming thing at the time, and the program at Minnesota was expanding rapidly. Dr. Stuart Chapin chaired the department of twelve faculty members. Chapin had written a book on social evolution, and he was interested in social statistics.² He was a liberal man who seemingly did not discriminate against women. Ruth Pearson and Jesse Benoit were both on the faculty. Ruth Pearson had a master's from the University of Chicago. Jesse Benoit became well known in the field.

Another faculty member, Pitirim Sorokin, came from Russia, where he had been secretary to Kerensky and a leader of the Mensheviks.³ The Mensheviks opposed Lenin and followed Trotsky. Their philosophy was somewhat anarchist: they wanted everybody to vote on everything, and the Bolshevik faction couldn't stand for that. The Bolsheviks said, "If we have to stop and vote on everything that happens, we'll never act." When Lenin and the Bolsheviks took over, Sorokin broke with the revolution and left his country. He first took refuge in Europe and eventually ended up in the United States as an emigré. Sorokin was an articulate, attractive man from the well-fixed class. In this country, he became quite a figure. He was anti-Bolshevik and, to me, a pain in the neck. He impressed some of the

best people in our department, however, a number of whom turned against the Russian Revolution because of his influence. Except for Sorokin, most of the faculty members at Minnesota were liberal.

Sorokin published an article in a Minneapolis newspaper about the terrible things going on in the Soviet Union. Alongside the article appeared a big picture supposedly of Bolsheviks shooting down Russians. Actually it was a famous picture of the czar's troops shooting down the peasants when they went with their petition. Nobody in Minneapolis knew the difference, but Ruth Pearson recognized the photograph and faced Sorokin: "You know this picture is incorrectly identified. Why don't you correct it?" she asked. "You know newspapers," he replied. Even though he admitted the truth, he never corrected the error.

I met John Markey in the sociology graduate program. He had come the year before as a graduate student and teaching fellow. His desk was two desks away from mine in the big department office used by six instructors. Dr. Chapin's secretary introduced us, and something clicked right from the beginning. For some reason, there was a terrific attraction between us. I remember the pulse in his throat; he, the look in my eye.

John remembered meeting me earlier. During World War I, he was shipped on a train of volunteers to Fort Monroe, Virginia. Enlisted men were invited to swim and dance in the swanky Hotel Chamberlain in Old Point. I had come to the Ball for Enlisted Men escorted by my brother, Barham, and my boyfriend, Russell. We were introduced to the enlisted men, as was the custom then, to make them feel at home and glad they had volunteered. When we shook hands, John says he noticed my eyes, "deep green like sapphires."⁴

Nine years later in Minnesota, John remembered our meeting. He always sat next to me in seminar class, where we had discussions around a long table. One day he pressed his knee against mine. I blushed, fearing someone would see, but I didn't move. I put a book in my lap in case somebody happened to look under the table. I was rooming in the home of an old couple who didn't want the lights on late at night, but they had a piano that I played for John. He especially liked "Under the Wide and Starry Sky," a love song by Grieg, and "Caro Mio Ben."

By Christmas 1924, we were going together steadily. I loved John because we could talk about anything, including philosophy and questions about life. Sometimes we sat out on benches in the park in the freezing cold, talking and getting acquainted. We took walks in our heavy sheep's wool jackets to see the stars and to talk about the future. Then we came back in the college hall. It was warm, at least, and we could talk more. To my knowledge, I never resisted John physically. We talked about it, but it never occurred to us to do anything but stay within traditional bounds.

One night the cold was so bitter that we went back into the college hall to get warm. The building had two sets of doors to the outside, and when we left, the first set of doors locked behind us. The big brass outer door in front of us was also locked, and we were caught in between. We didn't want the watchman, who was making his rounds with a flashlight, to know. He would tell the story all over campus, and several hundred students in the sociology section would laugh. John was a respected adviser who counseled many students about their problems. Imagining what would be said the next day about the scandal, I began to giggle hysterically. It seemed so crazy. Between the watchman's rounds, John got busy and unfastened the brass door and set it aside. Once outside, he replaced it and we made our escape. Had we been caught, we would have been the joke of the whole campus.

I don't remember when John asked me to marry him. I wasn't consciously aiming for marriage; I was ambivalent. I wanted to have a home, a husband, and children, and at the same time I wanted a career. John kept asking me, and finally I said yes. I was twenty-seven, and he was twenty-six. He planned originally to go into banking but decided against it, even before we met, because it wasn't a useful life. I wanted him to know that he was taking on a risky thing with me. It was clear that John could have a good academic career, while I intended to go into workers' education. For a day or so I thought maybe the marriage would be wrong—that I might cause him to give up his teaching career. We were both miserable for a day, and then we forgot it.

John and I were different, but not that different. We thought we would be all right. After making our decision, neither of us feared that we would fall short of the potentialities of the relationship. Ours was a cooperative venture. Before meeting John, I had started a poem that I couldn't finish:

From out this vast universe
Must come a soul so like my own,
Yet so unlike
that I will go to greet him
Though yet far off.

Then I was anticipating him; now he had become a reality.

John's tremendous strength of character attracted me. Members of his family on both sides were pioneer farmers in West Virginia. Something about working with the earth helps keep people honest. John was incredibly honest, the most honest person I knew. That's the way he lived. His people belonged to the Wesleyan Methodist church, a division of the Methodists sometimes called "shouting Methodists." One of his grandfathers was a volunteer preacher who farmed during the week and

The separation was all right for one year, but unless a movement issue was involved, I didn't want to repeat it. John and I wanted to live life as completely as possible so long as it fitted in and added to our share in the forward movement. Our long separations caused us to examine relationships between men and women and the role of sex in relation to the labor movement. The question was important. We disagreed with some others in the movement, deciding that so long as our relationship was as complete as it was, there was no need for sexual experience with anyone else. I guess we were "conditioned," or maybe just old-fashioned. The reason made little difference since it furnished a good livable basis and left us freer for the movement, and freer together and in our other relationships.

One evening when I attended a concert, one of the numbers got to me. Liszt's "Preludes" started me thinking about the worry and sorrow I had caused my mother. She hadn't the consolation of any understanding about my behavior. Somehow as a youngster, my conditioning toward her was never what it should have been, and she knew it. It had given me a "shell" as far as she was concerned. The inevitability of it got to me at times. After all, to Mother and Daddy we children were the main thing in life. It was a mistake to make it so, but they could hardly be held responsible for the mores by which they were raised. After the concert, I wrote my mother a nice letter (which was little enough, God knows) and so made myself "feel all right."

My dissertation, "Some Behavior Patterns of Southern Textile Workers," was written as a typical thesis with a lot of lingo, "objectivity," and statistics. At first Pitirim Sorokin was on my committee. I disliked him because he was a career man, making a good life for himself. John and he liked to play softball together, but I avoided him. Occasionally we saw Sorokin and his Russian wife at faculty gatherings at Dr. Chapin's house. Everybody was nice, but it was a strain for us. Sorokin was suspicious of me, I'm sure, because of my work with the state labor force and because of the chapter I wrote for the sociology textbook. Most of the faculty were unaffected by him, but he could be persuasive in his opposition. The doctoral committee decision had to be unanimous, and I don't think I would have gotten a degree had Chapin not arranged to have Sorokin taken off the committee.

I graduated with a sociology degree in June 1928 and a double minor in economics and psychology—rival disciplines that didn't get along very well. My doctoral committee required few changes in the thesis, calling it interesting and well written, a valuable piece of work. One member suggested I repeat the technique to study West Virginia mining towns. I would like to have undertaken the research, if only to get the human interest proletarian material and show up the system. I sent a copy of the thesis

to the YWCA national office and thanked Eleanor Coit and the national chairman of the YWCA Industrial Department for providing financial assistance and the opportunity to make the study.¹⁸

My committee thought the thesis should be published—at least that was the talk around the office. Sorokin may have learned of the plan and objected to it. A sudden, last-minute interest on his part suggested that something had stimulated him. Professor Chapin was a jellyfish, afraid of any kind of determined opposition, and I believe that Sorokin was successful in discrediting my thesis for university publication.

During the year I began looking for a job. As much as I liked to write, I disliked the business of peddling my wares—a job, I told John, that a soviet would take care of. We believed that only with the working class—our chosen people—would our work be really telling. John was considering a move to the South, and I encouraged him to look for jobs in West Virginia, Kentucky, or Alabama. We were both invited to interview at Rutgers and Bryn Mawr. Bryn Mawr paid our expenses, but neither institution offered jobs. The professors disliked the fact that I had kept my own name. Now nobody gives it a thought, but then the practice was still too new. They let me know in a quiet way that if a woman keeps her own name, goodness knows what else she may do.

John was interested primarily in research. His Ph.D. thesis about the language habits of children was published both in London and the United States.¹⁹ Pittsburgh offered him a teaching position, but he decided to stay at Connecticut College another year. Louise McLaren offered me a full-time job in the YWCA national office, which I turned down, preferring to work with more radical groups. I don't think Louise knew I was married since I only used my initials. Ernestine Friedmann, a former YWCA industrial secretary and long-time union worker, wrote and offered me a job at Wheaton College in Massachusetts, where she taught. I accepted, wondering how John and I could manage to live separately again for even a few months. I took for granted that something we both wanted would work out—a gamble I would not repeat another year. Our relation to the movement might entail future separations, but it seemed pointless when there was no real cause at stake. Living was so much fuller and more complete with John's comradeship. Even when we couldn't live together, our relationship added meaning and zest to life. There was an added fullness when we could be together in person.

Our love was a mysterious thing carrying with it an urge to realization beyond the self—a means for us to discover the eternal verities together through experience. Sometimes my impatient reactions—a trait I've always disliked in others—made us unhappy and out of step for a moment. I was determined that hurtful incidents between us shouldn't

repeat themselves. Shaw says acts are irrevocable; yet even though past events or actions can't be revoked, I believe their effects can be reintegrated or sublimated into something worthwhile. The Grieg song that John and I sang together—"Thou purest thought of all my truest living"—expressed the belief that we could grow out of and through difficult experiences into a finer and deeper relationship.

The Soviet Union had come to symbolize "going forward" for John and me. Throughout the spring, I anticipated our trip. Often I dreamed of being in the Alps again. I felt the trip would be a sort of pilgrimage—that in the silence and grandeur of the Alps we would come closer to the verities and to each other. I understood what the Psalmist meant when he said, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help." Grace Conklin's lines expressed my thoughts:

I have an understanding with the hills at sunset
When their slanted radiance fills the hollows
And the great winds let them be
And they are silent and look down on me.

A Russian proverb said, "Labor is the house in which love dwells." I believed not in my own power but in the world labor movement. Nowhere could I see any spiritual integration or power like that of organized labor with its dreams and art and creative experiencing. Isadora Duncan's autobiography, *My Life*, lifted my spirit to new open spaces. Whatever unseen cosmic forces were working toward a better human race, I believed they were a part of this movement. Seeing the Soviet Union with John—two aspects of life most dear to me—would be a chance to give ourselves more completely to the cause.

We planned to sail shortly after my commencement in early June, but I found myself unexpectedly pregnant. I didn't think I could travel if I was pregnant. We discussed an abortion, and John didn't want me to have one. He said the new life was coming, and we should let it come. He would work extra hours at night teaching so we could afford help. But I was stubborn: I wanted so badly to go to the Soviet Union. When I couldn't get an abortion in Minnesota, I asked my father to give me one. He refused, saying it would violate his physician's oath; he wouldn't recommend anyone either. I went to New York where the teachers' union found a doctor for me, but he was not good.

Afterwards I had regrets. I don't know why I had the abortion except that things were happening in the Soviet Union that we wanted to see, and I was afraid the pregnancy would stop our trip. In all my life, not having children earlier is the thing I most regret.