

Remembrance of Jeannette Aspden

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I met Jeannette, then surnamed Lindsay, during the summer of 1979 at the cryptically baptized International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA). The US and Soviet national academies of sciences had established IIASA in 1972 as a think-tank to study common problems of industrialized societies and located it near Vienna, Austria, a neutral nation. I do not recall exactly how or when we met, through professional cooperation on a scientific publication, socializing over spritzers at a tavern, playing softball, or just because we were both Americans, who made up about one-fifth of the 200 or so people who worked at IIASA.

We quickly became friends. One bond was that we had both worked for the US National Academy of Sciences in Washington DC. Another was baseball fandom and participation in Friday afternoon softball games played creatively by the Institute's staff members, many of whom did not know the rules. A third was that we appreciated the unusually murky, romantic, and often comic life of the Institute, which operated in a beautiful Hapsburg palace.

We remained friends right up to the present, through Jeanette's moves to London (114 Oglander Road, SE15 East Dulwich) , Pennington (New Jersey), and Washington DC. We enjoyed a Nationals game in June in the great seats that came with her 40-game plan season tickets. Jeannette's hope then was to stay well enough to see her team in the World Series. I bet that if the Nats had made the playoffs, Jeannette would have lasted too.

I should mention that I was friendly separately with Jeannette's late husband, Philip Aspden, before Philip and Jeannette became one. Philip had come from the Operational Research Services of the Department of Health and Social Security in London and worked at IIASA with experts from the Institute of Control Sciences of the Soviet Academy in Moscow making dynamic, hierarchical mathematical models of national health care systems. Philip would later co-author pioneering research reports on friendship formation in cyberspace and barriers to internet usage (1997) and on patient safety and prevention of medical errors (2003, 2007). Philip was a terrific person, warm, smart, and funny, and it was wonderful when Jeannette and Philip united, and now we miss them both.

Jeannette had arrived in Vienna with the challenging job of creating an attractive, best-selling line of scholarly publications with names like "The Bratsk-Ilimsk Territorial Production Complex" or my articles about the then-ridiculous idea of global warming. In fact, she succeeded amazingly well, and IIASA's publications earned recognition for excellent editing. Numerous colleagues who could not write well in English (or maybe could just not think straight) found themselves authors of well-reasoned papers impeccable according to the Chicago Manual of Style.

The basic phrase I identify with Jeannette is high standards. Jeannette was not a perfectionist. She understood that errors happen, in publishing and baseball, but she worked tirelessly to lift norms and adhere to high ones. She worried that every entity from a local café to world science was "going to hell in a handbasket," and she would combat the demons and sloth that made it happen.

This determination for excellence led Jeannette to institutions such as Bryn Mawr, the NAS, and later Carnegie Corporation of New York, where she felt at home and could relax at least a little. IIASA gave Jeannette perhaps her greatest challenge, and perhaps her greatest professional accomplishment: to set high standards for a young institution with bright but often slovenly researchers from Bulgaria to Budapest to British Columbia.

Jeannette would have been quite at home in Switzerland or Japan, which highly esteem quality control, but she was needed more in Austria, England, and America. England always vexed her with its veneers of excellence but lack of commitment to solving problems. American vexed her with the scale of its needs.

But Jeannette made islands of order where she could. I recruited her in 1990 to manage all the publications of the Carnegie Commission on Science, Technology, and Government. This elite of America's elite (President Jimmy Carter, Judge Stephen Breyer, former Secretaries of Defense William Perry and Ashton Carter, etc.) was producing ugly, barely grammatical broadsides. Jeannette cleaned up the act.

By the way, Pennington, where Jeannette lived during the Carnegie era, was an island of order within the disorderly State of New Jersey.

Baseball was a love and a metaphor for Jeannette, who kept a scorecard for every game traditionally by hand. We met during the apotheosis of the team of her youth, the Philadelphia Phillies. After 30 years of misspellings, dangling participles, and missing conclusions, in 1980 Mike Schmidt, Steve Carlton, and Tug McGraw led the team to victory in the World Series. Run the presses! The Carnegie era coincided with the heyday of the scruffy Dykstra-Kruk-Schilling teams. Jeannette never warmed as fully to these teams. She considered the final failure of relief pitcher Mitch Williams (also known as Wild Thing) in the 1993 World Series as something like unwillingness to proofread. In recent years Jeannette had the pleasure of applauding Jason Werth and Max Scherzer, who combined style, attention to detail, and team play.

The team play matters, and in these recollections I surely represent a score or more of Jeannette's friends, especially from Vienna but also from New York. Let me mention above all Sabra Bissette Ledent, a member of Jeanette's editorial team at IIASA, and also Nebojsa Nakicenovic, Holger Rogner, Arnulf Gruebler, Alan and Sue MacDonald, Susie Riley, Arthur Munkenbeck, Eduard Loeser, Roger Levien, and others whom I have not seen in many years, such as Leslie and Karin Mayhew. From the New York years, I mention David Kirsch and Maxine Rockoff and the Eminent Carnegie Persons such as David Hamburg and the late William T. Golden who were happily spoiled by Jeannette's high standards.

Jeannette's life in truth reminds us that none of us is entitled to effective, polished, correct communication. It emerges from disciplined, careful, informed work.

Naturally, Jeanette reserved her greatest effort and pride and highest standards for her children, Rebecca and Robert. Robert may have dangled a few participles while matriculating, but clearly now both are summa cum laude graduates of the Aspden School for High Standards, whether birthing children or submarines.

Thanks for this chance to reflect on a 40-year friendship, whose legacies continue.