

# **Lady of the Lake**

**A Brenda Ueland Sampler**



**“Lake Harriet, as perfect as  
a legend in a fairy tale!”**

**Books by Brenda Ueland**

*If You Want to Write*

*Me: A Memoir*

*Strength to Your Sword Arm: Selected Writings*

*Mitropoulos and the North High Band*

*O Clouds Unfold! Clara Ueland and her Family*

## INTRODUCING BRENDA UELAND

### *An Unconventional, Rule-Breaking Woman*

**Brenda Ueland** was born October 24, 1891, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Her grandfather, Ole Gabriel Ueland, was a farmer and statesman who served in the first Norwegian Storting (parliament). Her father, Andreas Ueland, immigrated to the U.S. as a child, dug sewers as a young man, and eventually prospered as a lawyer and judge. Her mother, Clara Ueland, was a prominent, civic-minded suffragette and progressive parent who gave her seven children great freedom.

“My parents were political idealists, feminists, democrats,” Brenda wrote. “They wanted their children to be light-hearted and athletic, to live outdoors and eat oranges and apples. My mother thought the girls should not be the menials of the boys, and so the boys made their own beds and the girls were on the football team in the pasture. She thought that if mothers were what they should be, surrounding their children with every freedom and happiness and cheerful intelligence, we would have the Millennium in one generation. She taught the baby how to hold and smooth the cat. She never cautioned us. We could walk endless miles in the country, swim across the lake, ride bareback.”

Brenda attended Wells College in upstate New York and Barnard College in New York City. Living in Greenwich Village she traveled with such bohemian free thinkers and literary lions as Mabel Dodge, Emma Goldman, Theodore Dreiser, Willa Cather, Eugene O'Neill, and John Reed. She married in 1916, had a daughter, Gabriel [Gaby], in 1921, and was divorced in 1926. In the 1930s Brenda wrote her two best-known books, *If You Want to Write* (1938) and *Me* (1939), both published by G.P. Putnam's Sons.

*If You Want to Write* begins, “Everybody is talented, original, and has something important to say...” and Brenda believed it. When the book came out an incredulous *Saturday Review of Literature* reviewer attacked Brenda's idea that most people should write. “Let the mediocre stick to reading,” he advised. Don't offer “false hopes to the untalented.” Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and biographer Carl Sandberg thought otherwise. He called *If You Want to Write* “the best book ever written about how to write.” (As of this writing the book has sold more than 300,000 copies since 1987, with a devoted following.)

The next year G.P. Putnam's Sons published *Me*, the story of the first half of Brenda's self-described "very unconventional life." In an edition re-issued in 1993, memoirist Patricia Hampl wrote that Brenda was a true "rule-breaking woman," and that *Me* was her "masterpiece."

In the 1940s Brenda wrote a column for the *Minneapolis Times*, and in 1945 received Norway's highest honor, the Knights of St. Olaf medal, for her coverage of Vidkun Quisling's trial and her relief work after World War II. She corresponded with, and was admired by, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, Eleanor Roosevelt, Upton Sinclair, Robert Penn Warren, and Carl Sandburg, among countless others.

During the last three decades of her life Brenda lived in a two-story stucco house near Lake Harriet, a lovely, spring-fed urban lake whose forested public shoreline held park-like trails. She walked the lake twice a day, "Once for the body and once for the soul." She was recognized around the city for her frequent, meandering 20-mile walks. "It is much better to walk alone," she wrote, "no cackle of voices at your elbow to jar the meditative silence of the morning."

Brenda's true love was life itself. "While you are alive, be *alive*!" was one of her favorite maxims. She had little patience for those who merely endured life rather than celebrating it. Her days were filled with passionate curiosity and conversation—about Tolstoy, Blake, Joan of Arc, railroad bums, marching bands, courage, and beauty. These were also the subjects of her writing.

She worked in her sunny, second floor studio, looking out over the lake, "Like Captain Ahab, watching the whales spouting," she said. She wrote for local periodicals, lectured widely, and kept extensive diaries. She took in stray cats and stray people with regularity. She set three AAU swimming records in the over-80 category, "because it took me longer to sink than the competition." She maintained the house herself, changing her heavy storm windows atop a stepladder well into her 80s. At 90, she fell from the ladder and broke her hip. She said the worst part of it was that she could no longer "dart from in between parked cars in the middle of city blocks and dodge on-coming traffic."

Brenda wrote every day—short stories, essays, newspaper columns, a journal, serials—by her estimate over six million published words. In her later years she became mentor and advisor to a circle of young writers. She would tell them stories of her life, if asked, but mostly she would listen, asking many questions of her young friends. "If you want to be interesting," she'd admonish them, "you have to be interested." She was interested in everything—politics, natural foods, beauty, bravery, protecting defenseless animals, and the Minnesota Vikings football team.

Brenda's secret for healthy living was the same as for good writing—slow down, as in, “long, inefficient, happy idling, dawdling and puttering.” And this: “...inspiration does not come like a bolt, nor is it kinetic, energetic striving, but it comes slowly and quietly and all the time, though we must regularly and every day give it a little chance to start flowing, prime it with a little solitude and idleness... you should feel when writing not like Lord Byron on a mountaintop, but like a child stringing beads in kindergarten—happy, absorbed, and quietly putting one bead on after another.”

Brenda was awarded the St. Olaf Medal by Norway's King Haakon VII for, “commendable spreading of knowledge about Norway abroad, and for promoting connections and solidarity between emigrated Norwegians and the homeland.” Years later she joked that she'd been “knighted by the king of Norway.” Asked if she told the king at her award ceremony that she was descended from Norway's King Sverre, circa 1150 AD, Brenda replied, “No, I didn't mention King Sverre because I didn't want King Haakon to feel uncomfortable. He might feel I thought he was only a pretender and not in the direct line.”

### ***“All Those Nice Souls Waiting Over Yonder”***

**Brenda entered my life** when I was 12 years old, when she married my grandfather, Sverre Hanssen, her third and last husband. As Brenda described it, her marriage to Sverre was “a conspiracy of fate to bring the two of us together,” as she leaned forward to look conspiratorially into my eyes, our foreheads almost touching, “because you and I Eric, we're closer than kin.”

Brenda was the most encouraging person I ever met, seemingly interested in everything I had to say, no matter how mundane. She made me feel fascinating, witty, and full of promise and even potential greatness. She did the same for everyone around her.

Brenda was clear and lucid and lively to the end. I lived a couple of blocks from her house to be close to her. She'd call me once or twice a week at about 5:00 PM and say, “Whatchya doin'?” which meant, “Come on down and have a Manhattan.” If she'd sworn off liquor, as she frequently did, lamenting that it “stupefies the soul,” we'd have peppermint tea.

On the day before she died, Brenda talked to me about the prospect of her death. “It's a joke,” she said. “I can hardly wait. It's the biggest adventure I've had yet—all those nice souls waiting over yonder.” On March 5th, 1985, at the age of 93, she set off to meet those souls.

--Eric Utne, March 1, 2017, Minneapolis





Brenda, flanked by her sisters Elsa (left) and Anne (right), ca. 1893.



The Ueland family and friends, circa 1896. Brenda is in the middle, holding the pony's bridle.



Brenda's dark hair and eyes inspired her childhood nickname, "The Eskimo."



Brenda in the backvard of her Stamford, Connecticut home. circa 1928.





Brenda in Greenwich Village, 1929.



Brenda, on the shore of Lake Calhoun, Minneapolis circa 1935 advised everyone to "walk well and grandly, with grace... the point is not to live long... we live forever anyway. The point is while you are alive be alive."



Brenda circa 1930.



Brenda circa 1940.

*"I am so original, so inventive that I dress about 25 years ahead of the fashion... I was the first woman in the Western World to have my hair cut off. I went to Henri in Greenwich Village... and told him to cut my hair off.*

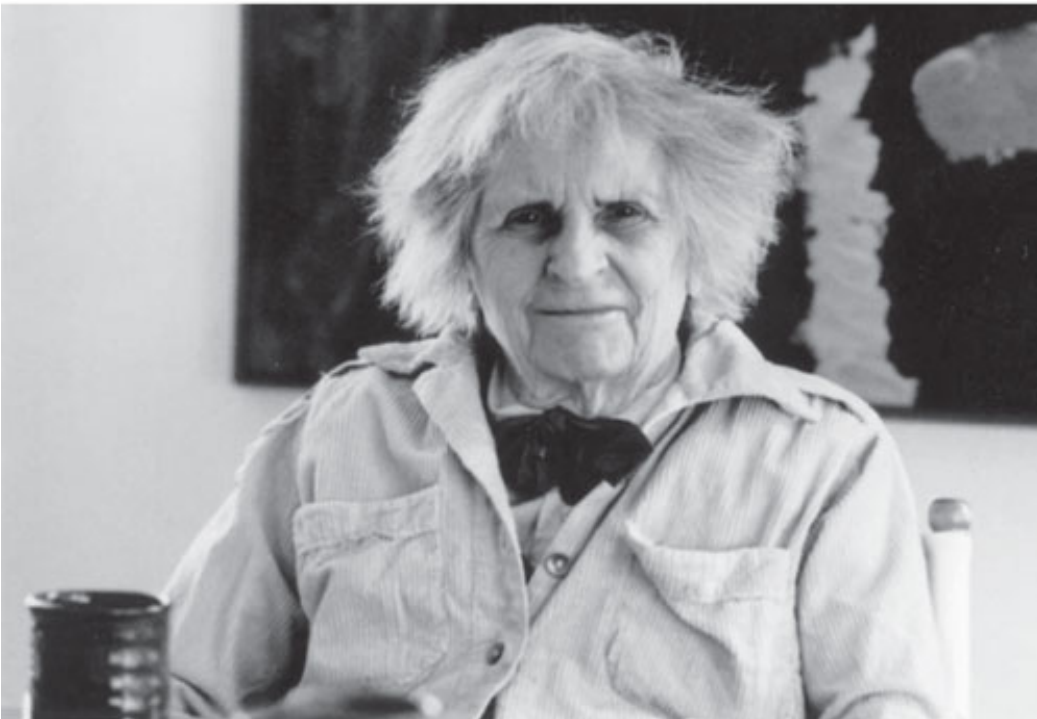
*He was frightened, apalled... 'I want it to be like Lord Byron's — as if a high wind were blowing from the rear.' It was splendid. Wherever I went seas of white faces turned to gaze. That is just what I liked."*



Brenda circa 1938



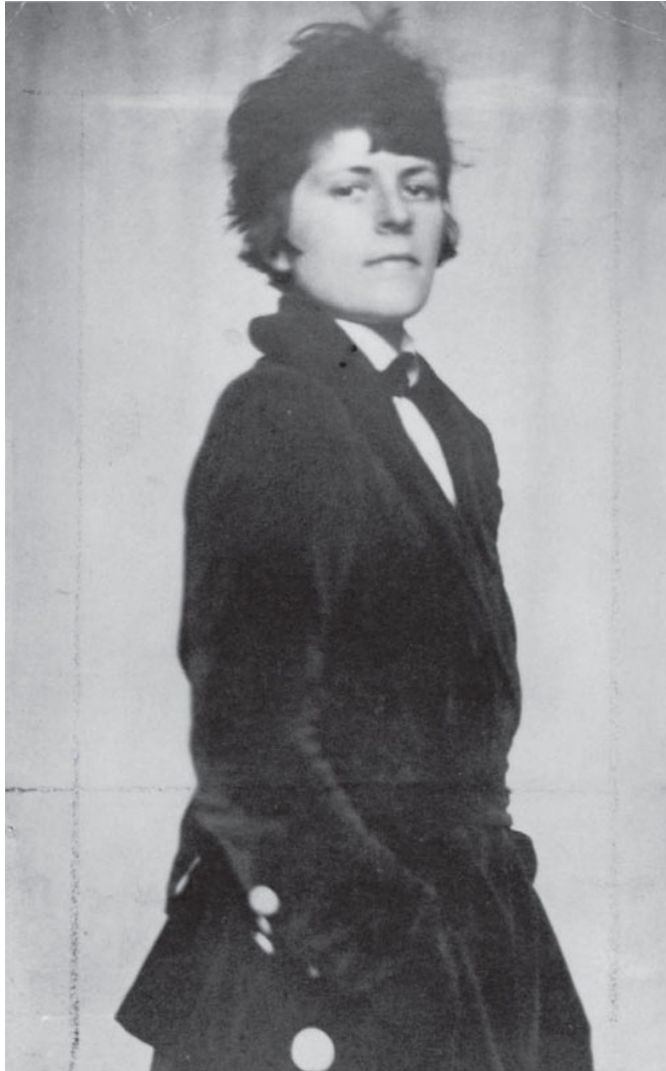
Brenda circa 1945



Brenda Ueland at 90, in 1981. "Death's a joke", she said.  
I can hardly wait— all those nice souls over yonder."



## A Sampling of Brenda Ueland's Writings



*"While you are alive, be alive"*  
—Brenda Ueland

### ***On Making Choices***

**The choices** turn up every few minutes, every hour. "To be or not to be?" To choose bravery or flight? To choose your natural carefree, rollicking self, to choose your cautious, pussyfooting self?

This making of choices I have mulled over all my life. My thought is that if your choices are lofty, noble, daring, perhaps even dangerous, the line of your life will go along a higher level than, say, if your choices are lazier, more self-indulgent, cozy and imitative. Your choices determine whether your life will go



along at a distinguished noble level or a lower level—duller, more namby-pamby. Or the level may be very low indeed—in the mud. Or it may be an opportunistic, crass, vulgar level.

We must try to make wonderful choices. Now this is not easy. For one reason, we don't know who we are. As Boethius, the philosopher and Christian martyr of the 5th Century, said to his torturers: "You have forgotten who you are."

I feel that I am about seventeen people. How to single out one's True Self? I seem to be sometimes my mother, sometimes my father, sometimes a whiner, a great queen, or a slob, a mother, a simpering lady or an old rip, a minister, a lion, a weasel. I have this concept: We are like onions, in layers. Many people live from the outer layer of the onion. They live in what other people think is the thing to do. They are merely imitative or conventional. Their Conscience is that still small voice that tells them someone is looking.

But we must try to find our True Conscience, our True Self, the very Center, for this is the only first-rate choice-making center. Here lies all originality, talent, honor, truthfulness, courage and cheerfulness. Here only lies the ability to choose the good and the grand, the true and the beautiful.

But how to find your Center? It is very hard in our cacophonous times; fractured with yelling activity, feeding, drinking, galloping, of frantic uncertainties that lead to psychiatry and booze. But you must try to find it. It is the old stuff—Know Thyself. But it takes solitude and there is none. I knew a remarkable woman who had a famous boys' school and she made them, every so often, watch the sheep alone and all night. A good idea. Gandhi's rule, like that of all the saints, was to be silent for twenty-four hours one day a week—not to utter one word. Then one was bound to look inward and the Center begins to appear. To find it you must ask yourself all the time: "What do I love? Why am I irascible? Why am I so afraid of old age and death? How odd, for both seem to be very common. Maybe I should not be afraid of them."

Now when you find this Center, or as you approach it, it is much easier to make choices. But here I must say that Unitarians may drive me out of the fold for heresy. I am a Unitarian but I am not a Humanist at all but a fantastical mystic. I must tell you that, with Plato, I think the purpose of life on earth is, "the tendance of the soul," that is to say, we are in school. And like Plato, I believe in the Doctrine of Reminiscence or Reincarnation, and that in this life we are supposed to learn something, to advance, to become better. As in Ibsen's mystical drama, *Peer Gynt*, I think our soul, or Solveig, is waiting for us at the end of life and hopes that we have passed with a good mark and have learned something through striving, mistakes, suffering and the like.

And therefore I believe that our choices should not be practical and pragmatic, founded on business achievements in the world, or success, or public acclaim, but we should try to make choices in the direction of nobility and bravery, if possible.

Now some of us do not want to be noble. Fine. If your True Self says, “Don’t be noble,” don’t be. But if it says, “Be noble,” and you want to be that that, you will go insane or have a nervous breakdown if you don’t make those choices. Now since our Conscience is a tiny compass inside us, our duty is to keep this little compass as sensitive and imaginative as possible, clear and alive, to keep it as nervously steady as possible.

How to do that? Two generations ago solitude was a normal part of every life. Now it hardly exists. There is not even the solitude of walking, of going from here to here on our legs.

Some people try to live up to a Conscience higher than their own, say that of Jesus or Calvin. A terrible mistake and it accounts for the persecutions and cruelties of Christianity, and the suffering of endless generations of children. For one thing, it can’t be done. Because the Conscience of many people tells them to be quite ordinary, eating, drinking, fighting and having a good time, but their artificially assumed Conscience won’t allow it and it makes them not only dreadful and cruel, but idiotic.

Now in making choices, never be grim. Think of life as a river, a smooth-following, golden Heraclitean river. Know that you will make dreadful mistakes with almost every choice. Hurrah! Congratulate yourself for daring, honorable, ridiculous mistakes. Children are so terribly afraid their parents will prevent them from making their most important mistakes.

There are tests to submit your choices to. Tolstoy said that a great man is one who has the highest Life Conception of his time. Well, I say to myself: “What is *my* Highest Life Conception?” I make myself define it, describe it. Or I say to myself, “In this trying situation, what would God do?” Hamlet should have asked himself that. The answer would have come immediately. “Don’t kill Claudius. Or your mother. Be kinder to Ophelia. Don’t fake madness. Intelligently plan the overthrow of Claudius and establish a good administration.”

The original great test for choices was the Ten Commandments. Still very good. Although some of us think that we have transcended some of them, like this one, “Honor thy father and mother.” Well this is an anachronism. You can be wonderfully good to them but you cannot honor them if they are not honorable. My friend, Ammon Hennacy, a Catholic and a religious anarchist who breaks the law in every war and goes to jail, said to the shocked policeman who arrested him: “An anarchist is a person who is too good to need a policeman.”

Jesus’s two commandments, “Love thy God with all thy heart and mind, and thy neighbor as thyself,” are helpful. Although a young philosopher said that to do unto others as you would be done by “would be rather catastrophic in a society of masochists.” George Bernard Shaw had an even better commandment, as an advance on that of Moses and Jesus. It is: “Is this that I enjoy doing for twenty minutes hurting any man or creature in the world?”

I have my own two commandments to propose to the world and curiously enough they are not stressed in the Bible; they are not even included in the Seven Deadly Sins. They are: No Cruelty. And no Lying.

That would take care of everything—ignorance-inducing newspapers, advertising, war, stealing, murder, vivisection, adultery. For example, the true viciousness of adultery is not the romantic love —there is no objection to Tristan and Isolde—but the cruelty and the lying, for lying is so bad for the liar and it is such an injustice and cruelty to the person lied to.

And if my two commandments prevailed there would emerge a world without psychiatrists, salesmen and nervous breakdowns.

Another important test for choices in ethics and morals is aesthetic. Beauty is the Lord. Cowardice is ugly and plug-ugly. So is tyranny and exploitation, the stronger bludgeoning the weaker. So is lying ugly. Chekhov said that lying is dirty and that it is even worse to lie in fiction than in conversation. Snobbishness is so disgustingly unlovely, such an indication of pin-headedness. Caterwauling and self-pity—such a revolting sight for human eyes!

If protesting against censorship nobody points out that works of sexual freedom are often so extraordinarily ugly. And ugliness is an infection, a pestilential thing. It invades people; just as Beauty heals and lightens them. It depresses them, lowers them, muddies them, changes them for the worse. Ugliness is Devil Worship. This should be a test for modern art and music. Much of it should be prohibited.

My final admonition in making choices is: Study especially what you *think* is your goodness. Is it self-sacrifice? Being meek, long-suffering? Watch it. It may be cowardice. And the meek do so much harm. A docile, put-upon wife ruins the nature and soul of her husband. Better to knock him out with a lead pipe. There would be no tyranny if nobody would put up with it. Or do you consider your greatest virtue a piercing critical sense? Watch it. It may be self-praise, or an inability to love, or a pervading hate. Are you doing work that is profitable but ugly and shoddy and a deceiving of the public; and do you explain it by saying “One has to live.” Ask yourself: “But do you?”

And never rest in any rule. No stereotypes are allowed. There is no resting place down here. George Herbert in a poem tells how at Man’s birth God gave him Beauty, Courage and so on, and at the bottom of the cup was Rest. God started to give him that but put it back. “No, he can never have rest. Eternal restlessness will at last throw him to my Breast.”

My conclusion is then: Avoid in your choices all cruelty and lying. After that, I say to my children, “Be Bad or Good, whichever is best for you.”

And here endeth the First Lesson.

*From Brenda Ueland’s papers, the Minnesota Historical Society*

## *Tell Me More: On the Fine Art of Listening*

**I want to write** about the great and powerful thing that listening is. And how we forget it. And how we don't listen to our children, or those we love. And least of all—which is so important too—to those we do not love. But we should. Because listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. Think how the friends that really listen to us are the ones we move toward, and we want to sit in their radius as though it did us good, like ultraviolet rays.

This is the reason: When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand. Ideas actually begin to grow within us and come to life. You know how if a person laughs at your jokes you become funnier and funnier, and if he does not, every tiny little joke in you weazens up and dies. Well, that is the principle of it. It makes people happy and free when they are listened to. And if you are a listener, it is the secret of having a good time in society (because everybody around you becomes lively and interesting), of comforting people, of doing them good.

Who are the people, for example, to whom you go for advice? Not to the hard, practical ones who can tell you exactly what to do, but to the listeners; that is, the kindest, least censorious, least bossy people that you know. It is because by pouring out your problem to them, you then know what to do about it yourself.

When we listen to people there is an alternating current, and this recharges us so that we never get tired of each other. We are constantly being re-created. Now there are brilliant people who cannot listen much. They have no ingoing wires on their apparatus. They are entertaining, but exhausting, too. I think it is because these lecturers, these brilliant performers, by not giving us a chance to talk, do not let us express our thoughts and expand; and it is this little creative foundation inside us that begins to spring up and cast up new thoughts and unexpected laughter and wisdom. That is why, when someone has listened to you, you go home rested and lighthearted.

Now this little creative fountain is in us all. It is the spirit, or the intelligence, or the imagination—whatever you want to call it. If you are very tired, strained, have no solitude, run too many errands, talk to too many people, drink too many cocktails, this little fountain is muddied over and covered with a lot of debris. The result is you stop living from the center, the creative foundation, and you live from the periphery, from externals. That is, you go along on mere will power without imagination.

It is when people really listen to us, with quiet fascinated attention, that the little fountain begins to work again, to accelerate in the most surprising way.

I discovered all this about three years ago, and truly it made a revolutionary change in my life. Before that, when I went to a party I would think anxiously: "Now try hard. Be lively. Say bright things. Talk. Don't let down." And when tired, I would have to drink a lot of coffee to keep this up.

Now before going to a party, I just tell myself to listen with affection to anyone who talks to me, *to be in their shoes when they talk*; to try to know them without my mind pressing against theirs, or arguing or changing the subject. No. My attitude is: "Tell me more. This person is showing me his soul. It is a little dry and meager and full of grinding talk just now, but presently he will begin to think, not just automatically to talk. He will show his true self. Then he will be wonderfully alive."

Sometimes, of course, I cannot listen as well as others. But when I have this listening power, people crowd around and their heads keep turning to me as though irresistibly pulled. It is not because people are conceited and want to show off that they are drawn to me, the listener. It is because by listening I have started up their creative fountain. I do them good.

Now why does it do them good? I have a kind of mystical notion about this. I think it is only by expressing all that is inside that purer and purer streams come. It is so in writing. You are taught in school to put down on paper only the bright things. Wrong. Pour out the dull things on paper too—you can tear them up afterward—for only then do the bright ones come. If you hold back the dull things, you are certain to hold back what is clear and beautiful and true and lively. So it is with people who have not been listened to in the right way—with affection and a kind of jolly excitement. Their creative fountain has been blocked. Only superficial talk comes out—what is prissy or gushing or merely nervous. No one has called out of them, by wonderful listening, what is true and alive.

I think women have this listening faculty more than men. It is not the fault of men. They lose it because of their long habit of striving in business, of self-assertion. And the more forceful men are, the less they can listen as they grow older. And that is why women in general are more fun than men, more restful and inspiring.

Now this non-listening of able men is the cause of one of the saddest things in the world—the loneliness of fathers, of those quietly sad men who move among their grown children like remote ghosts. When my father was over 70, he was a fiery, humorous, admirable man, a scholar, a man of great force. But he was deep in the loneliness of old age and another generation. He was so fond of me. But he could not hear me—not one word I said, really. I was just his audience. I would walk around the lake with him on a beautiful afternoon and he would talk to me about Darwin and Huxley and Higher Criticism of the Bible.

"Yes, I see, I see," I kept saying and tried to keep my mind pinned to it, but I was restive and bored. There was a feeling of helplessness because he could not hear what I had to say about it. When I spoke I found myself shouting, as one does to a foreigner, and in a kind of despair that he could not hear me. After the walk I would feel that I had worked off my duty and I was anxious to get him settled and reading in his Morris chair, so that I could go out and have a livelier time with



other people. And he would sigh and look after me absentmindedly with perplexed loneliness.

For years afterward I have thought with real suffering about my father's loneliness. Such a wonderful man, and reaching out to me and wanting to know me! But he could not. He could not listen. But now I think that if only I had known as much about listening then as I do now, I could have bridged that chasm between us. To give an example:

Recently a man I had not seen for 20 years wrote me: "I have a family of mature children. So did your father. They never saw him. Not in the days he was alive. Not in the days he was the deep and admirable man we now both know he was. That is man's life. When next you see me, you'll just know everything. Just your father all over again, trying to reach through, back to the world of those he loves."

Well, when I saw this man again, what had happened to him after 20 years? He was an unusually forceful man and had made a great deal of money. But he had lost his ability to listen. He talked rapidly and told wonderful stories and it was fascinating to hear them. But when I spoke—restlessness: "Just hand me that, will you?... Where is my pipe?" It was just a habit. He read countless books and was eager to take in ideas, but he just could not listen to people.

Well, this is what I did. I was more patient—I did not resist his non-listening talk as I did my father's. I listened and listened to him, not once pressing against him, even in thought, with my own self-assertion. I said to myself: "He has been under a driving pressure for years. His family has grown to resist his talk. But now, by listening, I will pull it all out of him. He must talk freely and on and on. When he has been really listened to enough, he will grow tranquil. He will begin to want to hear me."

And he did, after a few days. He began asking me questions. And presently I was saying gently:

"You see, it has become hard for you to listen."

He stopped dead and stared at me. And it was because I had listened with such complete, absorbed, uncritical sympathy, without one flaw of boredom or impatience, that he now believed and trusted me, although he did not know this.

"Now talk," he said. "Tell me about that. Tell me *all* about that."

Well, we walked back and forth across the lawn and I told him my ideas about it.

"You love your children, but probably don't let them in. Unless you listen, people are weazened in your presence: they become about a third of themselves. Unless you listen, you can't know anybody. Oh, you will know facts and what is in the newspapers and all of history, perhaps, but you will not know one single person. You know, I have come to think listening is love, that's what it really is."

Well, I don't think I would have written this article if my notions had not had such an extraordinary effect on this man. For he says they have changed his whole life. He wrote me that his children at once came closer; he was astonished to see what they are: how original, independent, courageous. His wife seemed really to care about him again, and they were actually talking about all kinds of things and making each other laugh.

Just as the tragedy of parents and children is not listening, so it is of husbands and wives. If they disagree they begin to shout louder and louder—if not actually, at least inwardly—hanging fiercely and deafly onto their own ideas, instead of listening and becoming quieter and quieter and more comprehending. But the most serious result of not listening is that worst thing in the world, boredom; for it is really the death of love. It seals people off from each other more than any other thing. I think that is why married people quarrel. It is to cut through the non-conduction and boredom. Because when feelings are hurt, they really begin to listen. At last their talk is a real exchange. But of course, they are just injuring their marriages forever.

Besides critical listening, there is another kind that is no good: passive, censorious listening. Sometimes husbands can be this kind of listener, a kind of ungenerous eavesdropper who mentally (or aloud) keeps saying as you talk: “Bunk...Bunk...Hokum.”

Now, how to listen? It is harder than you think. I don't believe in critical listening, for that only puts a person in a straitjacket of hesitancy. He begins to choose his words solemnly or primly. His little inner fountain cannot spring. Critical listeners dry you up. But creative listeners are those who want you to be recklessly yourself, even at your very worst, even vituperative, bad-tempered. They are laughing and just delighted with any manifestation of yourself, bad or good. For true listeners know that if you are bad-tempered it does not mean that you are always so. They don't love you just when you are nice; they love all of you.

In order to learn to listen, here are some suggestions: Try to learn tranquility, to live in the present a part of the time every day. Sometimes say to yourself: “Now. What is happening now? This friend is talking. I am quiet. There is endless time. I hear it, every word.” Then suddenly you begin to hear not only what people are saying, but what they are trying to say, and you sense the whole truth about them. And you sense existence, not piecemeal, not this object and that, but as a translucent whole.

Then watch your self-assertiveness. And give it up. Try not to drink too many cocktails to give up that nervous pressure that feels like energy and wit but may be neither. And remember it is not enough just to *will* to listen to people. One must *really* listen. Only then does the magic begin.

Sometimes people cannot listen because they think that unless they are talking, they are socially of no account. There are those women with an old-fashioned ballroom training that insists there must be unceasing vivacity and gyrations of talk. But this is really a strain on people.

No. We should all know this: that listening, not talking, is the gifted and great role, and the imaginative role. And the true listener is much more beloved, magnetic than the talker, and he is more effective, and learns more and does more good. And so try listening. Listen to your wife, your husband, your father, your mother, your children, your friends; to those who love you and those who don't, to those who bore you, to your enemies. It will work a small miracle. And perhaps a great one.

*From Brenda Ueland's papers, the Minnesota Historical Society*

### ***The True, Little Known History of Women***

**Robert Graves**, the poet and historian, says, "The most important history of all for me is the changing relationship between men and women down through the ages."

For thousands of years there has been a tragic situation—the domination of men and the degradation of women. We are so used to it we do not notice it. The situation has begun to change, but very little, and going back, I will show you why in a minute.

This was not always so. Now there is an underlying feeling that true equality is impossible because men and women are so different. We can never be like each other. But I disagree. We once were and we must again become noble equals.

Two things stand in the way of this: the age-old egotism of men, their anxious jealousy of women as equals, their touching infantilism, their dire need—all interwoven in their *amour-propre* to dominate women. The other thing that holds back the equality of women is our acceptance of our own feebleness, our physical weakness, our work to make a kind of virtue of it as a self-sacrificing sweetness, gentleness, and nobility. But this is wrong, too, as I will show.

Our weakness, smallness, and athletic ineptitude has come about because for four thousand years we have degenerated. Due to what? Male domination.

Fortunately women inherit from their fathers as well as their mothers. If all women were weak, cowardly, and flightily stupid it would not be so for more than one generation. But due to this imbalance, something regrettable has happened to us.

In fine wild animals—lions and lionesses, mares and stallions—there is no inequality. A mare can run as fast as a stallion. A lioness is about the same size as a lion and just as brave and capable.

Now go back three thousand years to Asia Minor, the first civilization that was somewhat stable. In those happy and far-off days women were deeply respected and loved by men and had a kind of wise command over things. This was evidenced by the greatest queen of all time perhaps, Semiramis of Assyria, a great, wise, and beneficent ruler. And she had another quality of women then—bravery, for she was also a great soldier. In fact that was what especially charmed her husband. She reigned for 42 years. And she realized, with the modern Einstein, that the only way to have a better world was to have better people and the design for her religious system was to achieve this. We know this from the Mystery Religions of Egypt, Greece, and Rome, all of which varied only in superficialities. When Semiramis died, after insuring that Babylon was the most magnificent city in the world, she was deified.

Now the goddesses of the Mysteries were all believed to have been originally extremely wise human beings and owed their deification to this fact. Ceres was said to have brought agriculture to mankind—which was one of those talented inventions of women. Cybele the Phrygian was described by the enlightened Emperor Julianus as “the Intellectual Principle,” the very fount of wisdom. Her symbol was the Dove, later the symbol of the Holy Spirit.

This love and earnest respect for women was evidenced in the matriarchal Greeks. Remember their Goddesses—Palas-Athene, the Goddess of Wisdom who sprang fully armed out of the forehead of Jove. That is to say, like all bright women with our sixth sense, intuition, which is the highest intelligence on earth, she did not need a lifetime of boring, ponderous academic analyses to know immediately what is the True, the Good and the Beautiful. The Goddess Diana the Huntress was equally athletic. The Nine Muses were female. In other words the Greeks knew that great poetry, music, history, drama sprang from the wisdom and golden imagination of women.

There were not startling physical differences between men and women then. The statue of the Winged Victory of Samothrace had not knock-knees, poor musculature nor enormous exaggerated breasts. There is a beautiful statue of Orestes and Electra who were brother and sister, their arms over each other’s shoulders. They are the same height, built identically alike with the same limber prowess and athletic beauty.

The same is true of Egyptian sculpture. The Pharaohs and their queens are almost exactly alike. Even their breasts are about the same. Secondary sex characteristics that we now consider masculine and feminine came about through centuries of artificial selection due to masculine domination. This is wrong and very sad.

Many matriarchal societies have existed in which there was the opposite, female domination over men, though masculine historians have suppressed this and cannot bear to think it. Nevertheless, they existed and still do in some places. In

Ancient Egypt, Diodorus Siculus tells us the women ruled their husbands. There is no ambiguity about it; the wives were absolutely supreme. Herodotus said: "With them the women discharged all kinds of public affairs. The men dealt with domestic affairs. Men were not allowed to undertake service or any of the functions of government. Nor were they allowed to fill any public office, which might have given them more spirit to set themselves against women. The children were handed over immediately after birth to the men, who reared them on milk." In Sparta women were the dominant sex. They alone could own property. This was the case among the Iroquois, the Kamchadales in Siberia, and countless others. "When women ruled in Kamchatka, the men not only did the cooking but all the housework, docilely doing everything assigned to them," according to the historian C. Meiners. "Men are so domesticated that they greatly dislike being away from home for more than one day. Should a longer absence than this become necessary, they try to persuade their wives to accompany them, for they cannot get on without the women folk.

"There was only one way in which members of the exploring party in Kamchatka could bribe the Kamchatkan women to undertake tasks regarded by them with contempt (men's work). This was by gratification of their sexual appetite. The point is worth noting because it is so characteristic of mono-sexual domination to find the dominating sex repaying the subordinate sex for sexual services. When men rule, it is the way of men to reward women for their caresses, and the practice, of course, tends to degenerate into prostitution. Where women rule we find the reverse of this tendency: women reward men for the gifts of love."

This is why in a Men's State like ours, men despise feminine tasks. Note that with us, women are proud when they can do men's work. No woman would be offended to be a Justice of the Supreme Court, just as an Ancient Egyptian would be proud of himself if he—even little he—could do a woman's work, that is, be a tall, swashbuckling soldier.

In Abyssinia, in Lapland, men did what seems to us women's work. Tacitus, describing the early Teutons, tells how women did all the work, the hunting, tilling the soil, while men idled and looked after the house, equivalent now to playing bridge and taking naps. The heirlooms in the family, a harnessed horse, a strong spear, a sword and shield, passed on to the women. They were the fighters.

And so they were in Libya, in the Congo. In India under the Queens of Nepal only women soldiers were known. In Dahomey, (now Benin), the king had a bodyguard of warrior women and these were braver than any of his men warriors and would reproach each other for cowardice or weakness with such phrases as, "You are a woman!" And physiologically, things were reversed: the women, more active and strenuous, became taller, stronger, tougher than the sedentary homebody men. Now I do not approve of this. I consider it as unhealthy, as disgusting as our own state of affairs, our exaggerated inequality.



Robert Graves says the greatest civilizations were matriarchal. But the ancient Hebrew were patriarchal, very anti-woman, with their stern, tetchy, male God, Jehovah. And so were the Romans for the most part, expressing their dominant masculinity in Law and War. But the Mycenaean Greeks and the Etruscans were matriarchal; far better civilizations, more graceful, gifted, and kind.

The Semitic race, Hebrews, Islam, all degraded women. They were obsessed with the idea of an all-male God and the superiority of the male sex. Moses and Abraham—in fact there is a persistent ungentlemanliness, a lack of feeling of justice and kindness toward women, in the Old Testament. They were so terribly concerned with breeding, concubines and herds. Instead of kind, mighty and beautiful Goddesses, they had one harsh, punishing He-man God. I have a friend who says: “if only the Lord’s Prayer had been, ‘Our Mother who are in Heaven...’ all would have been different.”

The obsession infiltrated into Christianity through Paul. And note how the three great monotheisms, Judaism, Mohammedanism, and Christianity have produced power-loving, aggressive people, revering masculine qualities with their constant wars, the subjugation of women (women, remember, were unfairly handicapped in this contest by having a child a year). They have tragically lacked the moral attributes of the Wisdom Goddess, love, mercy, purity, wisdom, and compassion. They have, in fact, been worshipping a semi-Deity, half a God. And so the world has arrived at its present state. We cannot deny that it is the worst half.

The divinely balanced nature, man *and* woman, together and equal, was manifested in Jesus. He was on our side. His power was restricted to ideas of compassion, healing and mercy and never applied to coercion and punishment.

Now women emerged somewhat in the Renaissance with the rediscovery of Greek culture. It flowered with excitement—a passion for learning and the nations of the great pagans. It became fashionable for kings and nobility to give their children, BOTH girls and boys, into the care of the greatest men of the day, like Erasmus. Vittorino da Feltre, teaching the children of the Dukes of Urbino, created three generations of wonderful men and women. You see the GIRLS were included. And great women to appear, Vittoria da Colonna whom Michelangelo loved, Caterina Sforza the soldier, St. Catherine of Sienna, the great teacher and stateswoman. I am sure that Joan of Arc was a Renaissance manifestation. Shakespeare’s women show this—wonderful women “learned, kind and fair” as he said of Sylvia. There was Portia, Beatrice, Cordelia, even Lady Macbeth had a little ability and courage—bright stars appearing suddenly out of fourteen dark centuries when women were sub-nobodies. Indeed, as they are now.

Then came the Reformation and Martin Luther—closed down the magnificent ideas of antiquity and kicked women back into the kitchen. And there we have stayed since the days of Susan B. Anthony.

Now about our physical inferiority. We have seen how the dominating sex gets bigger and stronger, but this is very dysgenic, the opposite of eugenic, and very hard on us all, the whole race. To feel superior, men chose wives with low-grade physical prowess, unable to walk or run decently, with feeble feet, ruined knees, and, as at present, enormously exaggerated breasts (a masculine predilection promoted now by that absurd monster, Hugh Hefner). Their offspring, of course, dwindle and become inferior. “A little woman as high as my heart,” was the tender phrase. And men chose such women, as Bertrand Russell said, “because it makes them feel so big and strong without incurring any real danger.”

Fear of bugs and thunder was adorable and it is still considered so, when it should arouse in men fierce scorn. Courage is the greatest virtue, because unless you have it, you cannot practice any of the other virtues. The fraidy-cat mother inflicts a terrible psychic handicap on her sons. Among wild animals the newly born offspring has no fear at all until he sees it in his mother. Men with instinctive fears because of cowardly mothers have to hide it all their lives, a cause of terrible mental suffering and breakdown.

Now why do women not yet amount to much? Hardly a hundred years ago, what was our lot? A child a year. (Incidentally, not much time to write Shakespeare’s plays, to compose symphonies.) No education. (When the University of Wisconsin allowed girls to recite in class with boys, there was a terrible uproar.) Not allowed to vote. To own property. To own our own children. Why didn’t we keep away from marriage then? Because there was only one alternative—prostitution. In the Civil War they needed women as schoolteachers, so they gave the girls a little education. Fifty years later, they needed typists and girls who could work in offices.

We had very poor health. Heavily corseted. Skirts fourteen feet around the bottom and dragging in the mud. No exercise at all, not allowed to “romp,” as the saying was. This induced chronic ailing, headaches, the vapors, ten days a month of acute menstrual sickness. (This was one of the big arguments against woman suffrage.)

Sargent at Harvard wondered why girls were such poor stuff athletically. Girls and boys under 13 were structurally identical, agile and lively. But after that girls were clapped in iron corsets and lost three inches in length of their thighs. No circulation. Thereafter they were weak and clumsy.

Considering these things we have not done so badly.

Now I come to a generalization. We, the women, do not have to worry about being kind. Our maternal physiology accounts for this. We are kind already and cannot help it. It is men who must worry about that. They must worry about their hardness, their dry know-it-allism, their destructiveness. (If any men in the audience have been lucky enough to inherit equally from their mothers, I do not mean you.) That is why I want an honorable equality.

For millennia, mothers have pampered their male children with the result that husbands are dreadfully aggrieved if they have not wives solely focused on their small achievements. Note that women admire men for their first-rate equalities. Men admire women *not* for their bravery, their intelligence, their contributions to society, but for their splendid courage in baking cookies for themselves.

Do not think our liberation has arrived. Just consider our unimportance. Being women, we abhor war—babies of 18 and 19 killed by the tens of thousands, for no reason at all. And we abhor just as much the killing by hundreds of thousands of slim little Asian boys and girls, living on a little rice, who heroically hurl themselves into death because they want their own country (Vietnam). (Note that, this aspect of the wars seems not to bother men too much.) Half of this country is women. The war goes right on. What women think is as powerless as a sigh, a breath, a vapor. Look at TV. Only men: soldiers, politicians, commentators...football players, coaches. No women. Oh yes, now and then one of those singers moaning about love. Or some narcissistic idiot applying hair spray. If women were equal, half the postmen, policemen, truck drivers, welders, air pilots, doctors, lawyers would be women, half of Congress, the judges and so on. Why not? I think half the soldiers should be women. This will be good because women are less docile than men and will tear up their draft cards in a fury; and probably go to the front and beat the tar out of all the soldiers of *both* armies: “Get out of here! Quit it! Go home, where you belong!”

Smedley Butler, a fierce cussing Major General of the US Marines in World War II, was a Quaker and a pacifist. After the war he went all over making speeches. “What the hell is the matter with you, you blank-blank women, that you allow it...letting these babies of 18 and 19 go to war!” I feel that way all the time. I wonder about it.

That is why we must have equal power in our society. We want to foster life, not coerce and destroy it. Every year twenty million American men go hunting, not from necessity, not for food, indeed at great expense, but for FUN. They kill more than a billion animals weaker than themselves, helpless. Women do not. And note that what we despise most is the unchivalry of it. Hunters are so cozily safe themselves.

That is why George Bernard Shaw said that one half of every governing body in the world MUST be women. To assure this, it will be necessary at first that every man elected has a female counterpart who goes into office with him.... Indeed we have not much time left to save this unhappy planet.

Men are loosening the bonds of women a little bit but they are almost hysterical with fear lest she exceed them in capacity and achievement. They must encourage her to work, but not to excel. They hold on to their superiority with all their might. They are afraid she might be portrayed as morally and spiritually superior for that might lead to the long-suppressed realization that she is really quite first rate,

maybe even a higher creature. She must therefore be dragged down and exposed as a near-animal, her worth being assessed by “vital statistics,” her aim to titillate and degrade men.

Rev. W. Hayes, a Unitarian minister in England writes: “Biologists tell us that woman has been the pioneer of progress from the beginning. In the upward path from the lower species, she has led the way—in the decrease of hairiness, in the upright gait, in the shape of the head and face and jaw. Woman is the civilizer. It is through woman that a sense of human nobility and possible beauty and greatness is awakened in man.” And the Irish poet AE wrote: “Woman may again have her temples and mysteries and renew again her radiant life as its fountain. Who shall save us anew shall come divinely as a woman.” And our good friend Robert Graves says this, and it is so remarkable that he should be able to see it: “A real woman” he says—he points out that the word “real” is the same word as “royal”—“A real woman neither despises nor worships men, but is proud not to have been born a man, knows the full extent of her powers and feels free to reject all arbitrary man-made obligations. She is her own oracle of right and wrong, firmly believing in her own five senses and the intuitive sixth.”

“Since she never settles for the second best in love, what troubles her is the rareness of real men. Real women are royal women; the word once had some meaning. Democracy has no welcome for queens. To reach some understanding of real women, one must think back to the primitive age when men invariably treated women as the holier sex because they perpetuated the race. Women were the guardians of spring, fruit trees, and the sacred hearth fire. Tribal queens judged each case on merit, not by legal code, as real women do; and showed little regard for trade and mechanical invention.”

Men should be happy because women will rescue us from Science, that horrible idolatry, from dry, hard analyses, the gross literalists and computers of everything. From the dry horrors of technology, bombs, automobiles, mass production and from those silly literal-minded, unloving mechanical fellows, those boring engineering scientific fellows, and measurers collecting rocks on the moon.

Women have almost no friends among men—we are always loved for the wrong thing—only a few very great ones, Pythagoras, Plato, Sophocles, Shakespeare, John Stuart Mill, Ibsen, Bernard Shaw. It seems to me one of the best ways to be a great man would be to be a true friend of women. You would be in good company. How? Neither pamper nor exploit them. Love in women their greatness, which is the same as it is in men. Insist on bravery, honor, grandeur, generosity in women.

And as for men, they should be kinder. Quit their silly mass-murdering, their conceit based on nothing, and their absolutely permeating, unstanchable infantilism, feeling wronged if all women’s force and strength is not devoted to themselves, usually their weaknesses, their babyism.

I say this because I think there is a state of great unhappiness between us. If we can be true equals, we will be better friends, better lovers, better wives and husbands.

*Address given at the First Unitarian Society in Minneapolis on March 7, 1971*

### ***Beauty Will Save the World***

**My father came** from Norway to Minneapolis when he was 17, dug the Washington Avenue sewer, and became a lawyer when he was 26. My mother was born in Ohio during the Civil War among Abolitionists rescuing runaway slaves. She went to high school in Minneapolis and although very poor, she had great beauty and style. After high school she taught Sixth Grade; and years later, one of her pupils told me: “I was never bright until I was in your mother’s class, and I have been bright ever since.”

My parents were political idealists, feminists, democrats. They wanted their children to be light-hearted and athletic, to live outdoors and eat oranges and apples. My mother thought the girls should not be the menials of the boys, and so the boys made their own beds and the girls were on the football team in the pasture. She thought that if mothers were what they should be, surrounding their children with every freedom and happiness and cheerful intelligence, we would have the Millennium in one generation. She taught the baby how to hold and smooth the cat. She never cautioned us. We could walk endless miles in the country, swim across the lake, ride bareback. She would have liked Blake’s aphorism: “Prudence is a rich, ugly Old Maid courted by Incapacity.”

Now my wonderful parents raised us in the Unitarian Church. Did Unitarianism add to our grandeur and wisdom? I think it did. We grew up more lighthearted and untrammelled than Orthodox children, overawed and inculcated with guilt (Original Sin). The hopeless naughtiness of that—always having to drag Original Sin around! I think we were just as benign and good as the others, perhaps more so—more original, easier laughter, allowed to even have a little engaging rascality.

And my parents were generous to all religions—all of us poor humans groping in the darkness toward Eternity. The only thing wrong about Orthodoxy, they thought, was the grimness, the fraidy-catism, the self-righteous conceit, always trying to discipline others.

My mother and my brother Torvald were having a little religious conversation and he said, “Is God a bird?”

This shows that there was not much religious alarm in the family. We never said our prayers and no one told us how. The neighbor children had to say at night that frightening and dismal prayer, “If I should die before I wake...” And it was only when I heard people speak of church and religion and show their distressing

tinted cards of Jesus and his disciples traipsing barefoot in their nightgowns, that I became scared of graves, dead bodies, sin and Hell and other horrors, quite unnecessary.

An interesting thing is that entirely unadmonished I became religious myself, quite cheerfully and naturally so. And whenever great men and women reveal in their lives and works their souls—Tolstoy, Blake, Carlyle, Bach, Michelangelo, Mozart, St. Joan, St. Catherine of Sienna—there expands in me a kind of light and recognition. I seem to see farther into the mysterious gloom—perhaps not so gloomy after all.

My anxiety is that Unitarians will become only Science Idolaters. Perhaps God *IS* becoming a bird to them—not a nice live bird but a stuffed bird. An electric bird, a gasohol bird. In fact I like science less and less. Isn't it Intellectual Pride? Maybe it's Lucifer after all. See how they are always measuring and counting, and what's so wonderful about that? Usually it is merely utilitarian and destructive—weaponry and herbicides, shots for cancer that don't work, more computers, more concrete on meadows, faster and more terrible airplanes looking exactly those fiends that great Dante saw in his genius and appalling imagination. No. Science may be the Tree of Death. Where is the love and beauty of it?

Just the other day in that remarkable periodical that costs 25 cents a year, the *Catholic Worker*, I discovered that both Dostoevsky and the great Russian theologian Berdynev said exactly the same thing: "Beauty will save the world."

I believe it. Please remember that and make a note of it.

*Excerpted from a 1981 speech to the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis*

### ***Blessed Are the Debonair***

**The French** say things so beautifully. In French a son is *mon fils*, my son. But a son-in-law is *mon beau fils*, my *handsome* son.

Another thought: The English Bible says, "Blessed are the meek." Alas, I despise meekness and cannot bear it. (I think we should all be great kings and queens – that is the vision to have about one's self.) But in the French Bible the word for meek is *debonair*. "Blessed are the *debonair*." That expresses what is meant so much better. Not Meek but *debonair*, flexible, blithe, light-hearted, open, free. Suggestible, so that great ideas can enter you. I like that. That is the ticket.

About being kings and queens, my father translated Bjornson's poem to Ole Gabriel Ueland [Brenda's grandfather]. The last three verses are:

*He sank beneath the standard  
While striving further on,  
Therefore by strong valkyries*



*He was carried to their home.  
From chilly winter evening  
They onward grandly led him  
To the lighted Hall of Saga  
And toward the Chief's high bench.*

*Then up rose many an old lord  
And forward stepped to greet him,  
And first of all King Sverre  
With whom he was of kin.*

I was eating in our kitchen and Inga was at the sink washing dishes. Inga is one of us, a member of the Ueland clan in Norway. She had been our cook (boss) for thirty years. I said:

“Inga, do you think it’s true that we are descended from the Kings of Norway?”  
She wheeled on me fiercely.

“Brenda, don’t laugh! That’s true! Mr. Ueland had that kingy feeling, Mrs. Taylor (my sister Anne) has that kingy feeling and,” with inexpressible hauteur, “I have it!”

The truth is that everybody in the world should have the kingy feeling: pride, honor, strength, nobility. As for my sister, Anne Taylor, she once went to see my remarkable clairvoyant friend, Maybelle Fahstrom, who could see with her “third eye” angels, archangels, your ancestors, the future, the past. Maybelle (St. Maybelle of Upton Avenue South I called her) at once “saw” that Anne had been a great duchess. “She was the Duchess of Gloucester in another incarnation but this time she’s slumming in the Ueland family.”

*Excerpted from the Minnesota Posten (October 1977)*

### ***On Writing***

*“He Whose Face Gives No Light Shall Never Become a Star”*  
—William Blake

**Why urge** everybody to write when the world is so full of writers, and there are oceans of printed matter?

Well, all of it does not amount to very much and little is worth remembering. Every two or three years a book comes out and everyone likes it very much and praises it and says it is a true work of art. And for these books I am grateful. But there could be a great deal more living literature, that really talks to people and does not just kill time for them.

And what is a little book or two, when there is so much greatness in the world hidden all around us? These good things that appear in print seem so meager, so slight, so publisher-touted, in this country of a hundred million people. Now one or two little books—making an impression for two years, forgotten utterly in five—that is not enough, when you think what there might be, what might come out of people.

But if (as I wish) everybody writes and respects and loves writing, then we would have a nation of intelligent, eager, impassioned readers; and generous and grateful ones, not mere critical, logy, sedentary passengers, observers of writing, whose attitude is: “All right: entertain me now.” Then we would all talk to each other in our writing with excitement and passionate interest, like free men and brothers, and like the people in paradise, whom Dostoevsky described in a story: “not only in their songs but in all their lives they seemed to do nothing but admire each other.” The result: some great, great national literature.

And this is all that I have to say.

To sum up—if you want to write:

Know that you have talent, are original and have something important to say.

Know that it is good to work. Work with love and think of liking it when you do it. It is easy and interesting. It is a privilege. There is nothing hard about it but your anxious vanity and fear of failure.

Write freely, recklessly, in first drafts.

Tackle anything you want to—novels, plays, anything. Only remember Blake’s admonition: “Better to strangle an infant in its cradle than to nurse unacted desires.”

Don’t be afraid of writing bad stories. To discover what is wrong with a story write two new ones and then go back to it.

Don’t fret or be ashamed of what you have written in the past. How I always suffered from this! How I would regurgitate out of my memory (and still do) some nauseous little lumps of things I had written! But don’t do this. Go on to the next. And fight against this tendency, which is much of it due not to splendid modesty, but a lack of self-respect. We are too ready (women especially) not to stand by what we have said or done. Often it is a way of forestalling criticism, saying hurriedly: “I know it is awful!” before anyone else does. Very bad and cowardly. It is so conceited and timid to be ashamed of one’s mistakes. Of *course* they are mistakes. Go on to the next.

Try to discover your true, honest, untheoretical self.

Don't think of yourself as an intestinal tract and tangle of nerves in the skull that will not work unless you drink coffee. Think of yourself as incandescent power, illuminated perhaps and forever talked to by God and his messengers. Remember how wonderful you are, what a miracle! Think if Tiffany's made a mosquito, how wonderful we would think it was!

If you are never satisfied with what you write, that is a good sign. It means your vision can see so far that it is hard to come to it. Again I say, the only unfortunate people are the glib ones, immediately satisfied with their work. To them the ocean is only knee-deep.

When discouraged, remember what Van Gogh said: "If you hear a voice within you saying: You are no painter, then paint by all means, lad, and that voice will be silenced, but only by working."

Don't be afraid of yourself when you write. Don't check-rein yourself. If you are afraid of being sentimental, say, for heaven's sake be as sentimental as you can or feel like being! Then you will probably pass through to the other side and slough off sentimentality because you understand it at last and really don't care about it.

Don't always be appraising yourself, wondering if you are better or worse than other writers. "I will not Reason & Compare," said Blake; "my business is to Create." Besides, since you are like no other being ever created since the beginning of Time, you are incomparable.

And why should you do all these things? Why should we all use our creative power and write or paint or play music, or whatever it tells us to do?

Because there is nothing that makes people so generous, joyful, lively, bold, and compassionate, so indifferent to fighting and accumulation of objects and money. Because the best way to know the Truth or Beauty is to try to express it. And what is the purpose of existence Here or Yonder but to discover truth and beauty and to express it, i.e., share it with others?

And so I really believe this book will hasten the Millennium by two or three hundred years. And if it has given you the impulse to write one small story, then I am pleased.

*Excerpted from the book If You Want to Write, first published in 1938 by G.P. Putnam's Sons*

***Our Primeval Motion***  
***A Little Philosophy About Running***

**More and more** people do it. It is an addiction. They cannot stop it and do not want to. The ability to run a Marathon seems to be built in. It is slowly acquired after days and months of trotting and jogging around. If you keep running, there you are—able to go 26 miles. A scholarly friend (young middle-age) now finds herself running six miles a day in one hour. And the queerest thing of all is her sorrow, indignation, when it is 20 below zero and there is a blizzard and she cannot do it. She misses it grievously. It has become a pleasure, a delight, an absolute necessity.

And here is the most mysterious, the most paradoxical thing of all: Instead of subtracting, or taking away from the sum of one's energy, it seems to double it, to quadruple it.

Why does it become such an addiction, and why cannot people stop running? I think it is perhaps our original, primeval way of motion, that it is really natural, right for us to gently run. We are then like happy deer, antelopes, wolves, wild horses. Running is the way we *should* move. And for miles.

And please remember the awful experience Americans have been through for two generations: riding in cars. From here to New York and from here to the drugstore. You make a rather inadequate parking effort with your car and you say apologetically to your passenger: "Never mind. We can walk to the curb."

I often think of man's history on earth as the round dial of a clock and say that twelve o'clock is the Year one Anno Domini, the birth of Christ. Now man has existed on earth millions of years.

The hand of the clock indicating our year, 2,000 years, would be about a hundredth of a hair beyond twelve o'clock. It is really just an Eyewink of time, an Augenblick. And this Eyewink, our even briefer period, is the Age of Gasoline. It is our Spree on Gasoline. World Wars, Hiroshimas, airplanes, bombers, neutron bombs, H-bombs, Millions dead, billions frightened and wretched. Just think! Maybe in another Eyewink gasoline will be exhausted. All gone!

I know that when that time comes, I myself, the blue birds, the cardinals, the wild animals, the frogs, the cowslips, the naturalists, the poets, the prophets, the peacemakers will be delighted! A few darling weeds will begin to push through the ugly, sterile concrete. No more gasoline! Thank God! Hurrah, hurrah!

*Excerpted from the Minnesota Posten (December 1977)*

***Like Lord Byron***

**Sometimes people** complain—my children and others—that I dress so unstylishly, so eccentrically, indeed so badly. I say this: "If I did not wear torn

pants, orthopedic shoes, frantic disheveled hair, that is to say, if I did not tone down my beauty, people would go mad. Married men would run amuck.”

And sometimes I say this: “As a matter of fact I am so original, so inventive that I dress about 25 years ahead of the fashion. I can prove it. I was the first woman in the Western World to have my hair cut off. I went to Henri in Greenwich Village, the French barber at the Hotel Breevoort in New York, and I told him to cut my hair all off. He was frightened, appalled. To cut off that nice, very black, ladylike hair, with a pug! I described to him what I wanted. “I want it to be like Lord Byron’s—as if a high wind were blowing from the rear.”

He did so. It was splendid. Wherever I went seas of white faces turned to gaze. That is just what I liked.

*Excerpted from the Minnesota Posten (August 12, 1979)*

### ***Inspiration***

**I learned...** that inspiration does not come like a bolt, nor is it kinetic, energetic striving, but it comes into us slowly and quietly and all the time, though we must regularly and every day give it a little chance to start following, prime it with a little solitude and idleness. I learned that you should feel when writing, not like Lord Byron on a mountain top, but like a child stringing beads in kindergarten—happy, absorbed and quietly putting one bead on after another.

*Excerpted from the book If You Want to Write, first published in 1938 by G.P. Putnam’s Sons*

### ***Bright Shoots of Everlastingness***

**I have a theory** that music lifts the spirit from the ground to a little freedom. It is as though you float a little above yourself, and dust falls away, and what we are meant to be is there. *Jakob Böhme* said that Eternity is that flash of time when we are what we love. And music does that—“The bright shoots of everlastingness.”

*Excerpted from Mitropoulos and the North High Band, 1983*

### ***Pulled Two Ways at Once***

**All my life** I seem to have had two forces working in me—pushing me, making me search, search and never rest. They give me an energy that sets my mind wrangling and struggling and arguing and discussing things, whenever I am alone. One energy seems to be the wish to be important and admired. The other energy is that I want to *be* what is admirable inside, whether anyone admires me or not. And this passion grows as the other one wanes.

They have a kind of rhythm. I sometimes describe it by saying that for two weeks I seem to be my father and for two weeks my mother. That is, for two weeks I want to be bold and remarkable, and this fills me with energy for a while. But then suddenly, almost in a few minutes, I will think: “Oh no, to be good, unselfish is the thing. How obnoxious, how meaty, empty and egotistical, all that masculine striving!” And I want to be graceful and tender—even to have ringlets and wear lace blouses—to be a listener, and a fosterer of others and all life.

*Excerpted from Me, first published in 1939 by G.P. Putnam’s Sons*

### ***Beauty and Bravery***

**Health is not a humdrum**, inconsequential thing that means you are able to get to the office and stay out of the hospital. The word “health” means also “whole” and “holy.” And you cannot have beauty and bravery and grandeur and exuberance, generosity and joviality and a kind of affectionate fearlessness unless you have health. Nor indeed can you be really sane.

Now the queer thing is that you can have it if you want it, although you must know how, and that is what I am going to tell you. But remember this: Health, like Freedom, must be won every day. You have to exert yourself in a lively and dauntless way throughout your whole life in order to get it.

A great deal is known about it. Doctors know less about it than almost anyone and what I say is going to throw them and thousands of people in a rage. Great people from Hippocrates and Plato to Michelangelo and Tolstoy, Gandhi, George Bernard Shaw, Swedenborg, knew what health was and how to achieve it, although so far none of them has discovered how to stay alive on this earth forever...

Now the interesting thing is this: While doctors disagree about why we are sick in so many hundreds of various ways, these great wise ones whom I have just mentioned, who knew so much about health, all agree about the causes of it and virtually recommend the same thing if you want to achieve it...

I had the most remarkable and wonderful mother. When she married my father she was very slender, albeit beautiful and intelligent. Somebody predicted that she would not live two years, she seemed so finely spun and delicate. But she lived and had eight children. I never heard her utter a cross or irritated or unkind word and, without obvious, nervous strenuousness, she accomplished wonders, among other things woman suffrage for the State of Minnesota and the United States, one of their most eminent leaders. She worked serenely sixteen hours a day, finding time to take long solitary walks and to read to her children in relays, Shakespeare to the older ones and Dickens and Sir Walter Scott to the younger.

She had ideas about health. Nobody else seemed to give it a thought in those times. Girls and women were tightly corseted. They were not allowed “to romp.”



They dragged heavy skirts fourteen feet around the bottom in the mud, wore layers of starched underwear and thick black stockings.

We had a large white house on Lake Calhoun in Minneapolis and four green and wooded acres. My mother had the absurd and unheard of notion that sunlight and air were good for us. She put me in the sun as a baby, so browned that Mr. Emmanuel Cohen called me "The Eskimo." I remember my pretty little brother Rolf, four years old, walking under the elm trees and in the checkered sunlight, naked like Cupid, with golden ringlets. We swam in the lake, across the lake and back, like dolphins. We went barefoot in order to have plump and perfect feet like quattroceto angels...

Fridtjof Nansen had grave misgivings about "urbanization." This was happening even in Norway. When I saw him in 1929 he spoke of it sadly. There had always been the sturdy, independent and fearless farmer-people of Norway, each one a kind of bold, truth-telling democratic king on his own rocky little farm, with his plow, his few cows and goats going up to the high mountain pastures in summer, his boat going out on the glassy fjord or to the wild sea to fish. These healthy fresh-faced people were being drawn, charmed into the cities by regular wages, and heated offices. He was afraid they would not only lose their proud separateness and sturdiness but their great health, their tirelessness at work, their splendid physiques with broad shoulders, wide chests and straight long legs.

Of course this has happened all over the world. In England, the stature of Scottish laborers who went into English factories dropped five inches in a generation. We know the story of the swollen cities in the United States, the starving family farms.

When Nansen was honored at St. Andrews University in Edinburgh the title of his Rectorial Address to the Scotch students was "Adventure."

"You will find your Adventure," he said, "for life itself is an adventure. Everyone should try to hit upon his own trail. Do not lose your opportunities, and do not allow yourself to be carried away by the superficial rush and scramble which is modern life.

"The first thing is to find yourself, and for that you need solitude and contemplation, at least sometimes. I tell you deliverance will not come from the rushing, noisy centers of civilization. It will come from the lonely places. The great reformers in history have come from the wilderness.

"My friend, Knud Rasmussen, the Danish explorer, told me a remarkable story about a medicine man and conjurer of the primitive Eskimo of the Barren Grounds of Northern Canada. This simple savage who had hardly ever seen a white man, said to his friend and colleague, Rasmussen: 'The true wisdom is found far from men, out in the great solitude, and can only be obtained through suffering.

Privation and suffering are the only road to wisdom, and they alone can open a man's mind for that which is hidden to others.'

"He went on to describe how, in order to become a sage, a man had to fast fourteen days in an unheated snow-hut at the coldest time in the middle of winter. Then comes another medicine man with a drink of hot water and a little raw meat. And after that the man has to go on fasting as long as he possibly can. He should never finish his struggle for wisdom."

But most people, Nansen said, "are satisfied too soon and that is the reason why there is so little wisdom in the world..." And so few, so few great men and women! Leaders! We absolutely must have them!

He said that it is doubtful if there is any superiority in so-called "civilized man." "Go back 6000 years and the ancient Egyptians accomplished miracles with their simple implements and their great intelligence. How can we feel ourselves superior to them?"

"If we go still further back – some twelve or fifteen thousand years – we find Cro-Magnon people. With magnificent stature, taller than we are, perhaps six feet three inches in height, and what skulls! Look at the beautiful high arch from the forehead to the base of the skull! A cranium with one-sixth more brain than that of a modern European..."

"Oh no, my friends. The rising trend of evolution stopped thousands of years ago, owing to the condition of modern social life, especially in its urbanization, which makes the inferior elements of mankind so prolific. The human race is certainly changing, but it is no use galloping if you are going in the wrong direction."

He thought that a fundamental evil in urbanization is that there is never again any true solitude, no prolonged loneliness. In that loneliness there lies illumination and vision and bright strength and courage. And as he found it skiing in the wildest mountains of Norway, here again I bring forward my earnest argument: that at least you can walk, and walk alone for miles and miles and day after day.

This in our day is the only absolute guarantee of thought, of your own thought, not the thoughts of others, or the scattered, nervous, multitudinous thoughts of books, newspapers, professors, parents, ministers and politicians...

Another interesting and gallant Norwegian, an athlete and hero, was Colonel Ole Reistad. When the German Grand Fleet steamed up the Oslofjord that black April night, he was the Commander of 14 airplanes so antique that he called them "a flying museum." German Messerschmitts cluttered the whole sky. The Flying Museum did its tiny best, retreating northward towards Narvik. Then Ole Reistad crossed Siberia and came to America. Norwegian boys joined him there, some coming in rowboats across the North Sea. He trained the Royal Norwegian Air Force in Canada. We know its achievements with the R.A.F.

In Norway he as a pre-eminent athlete, the winner of the Egeberg Trophy. Three times during the war he came to Minneapolis and here are some notes about him that I wrote then:

November 1943. He has recently been made a Colonel although he said, “No. I am a Major. Norway is where they fight. No one must go back to Norway with more titles than he had before.”

When he arrived at the Minneapolis airport he was bare-headed. He loves the sun. He has a blazing sunburn and his yellow hair and eyebrows are as bright as gilt. I cannot keep him indoors: When reporters and others come to interview him he makes them sit outdoors with him on the western lawn. The rest of us feel a little uneasy when we are not warm and stuffy in the house but he seems to feel comfortable only out under the sky.

When it was time to take him downtown for his speech on the radio, there he was on the lawn running figure-eights in tennis shoes and shorts. Earlier in the morning when I came down to breakfast Selma was looking uneasily out the dining-room windows at Lake Calhoun, grey and wolfish with the north wind. “He went swimming!”...

...In 1944 I asked him about his family. His wife was in Norway, quietly starving under the Nazis and risking her life in the Underground. He showed me her picture with smiling eagerness – a short nose, yellow hair, a wide-stretched smile. “She is very saucy,” he said admiringly. He had two boys aged ten and twelve.

“What will they be when they grow up?”

“Farmers of course,” he said. “Every other generation must return and become farmers again. Farmers do the hardest work. They become straightforward, independent. That is their greatness. If people are more than one generation in cities, in offices – lawyers, businessmen, professors – courage goes. They become nervous, indirect crafty. This is not good....”

*Excerpted from Brenda’s unpublished book, Beauty and Bravery*

### ***On Life***

**I sit here** looking out the window. I have been working all night. I am wearing dark-blue flannel sailor pants, heavy brogues, a white cotton shirt, a red bow tie, a white sweatshirt washed so much that there are holes in it and the sleeves are frayed. I need a walk badly, for I have been working much too hard and steadily under pressure, for the last two months.

And it is queer, I have not a touch of resignation about the future, or nostalgia, or poetic mournfulness for the days that are gone. I seem to be entirely cheerful and full of anticipation. I seem to be always holding my breath with suspense, as

though something wonderful were going to happen the next day and the next; and I wish everybody in the world could feel this way. And now goodbye.

*Excerpted from Me, first published in 1939 by G. P. Putnam's Sons*

### ***On Death***

**You know** much brighter souls than I—Blake, Swedenborg, and Jesus—great souls more pervious to the Invisible than I am, say that when we die we are not dead. I cannot help but believe that. It is a certitude. I cannot get away from the notion.

Death is unbearably tragic and grievous because it is a kind of farewell. But it is not forever. Those who are Yonder, in a queer way—I have discovered this myself—are more puissant than ever. They are more befriending, more strengthening, more helpful.

Then there is this thought. Rudolph Steiner, the Austrian mystic, said that the Catholic prayers for the dead are so right, so true, because the person who has died at first is a little lost. Our love helps him, makes it easier for him to find his way. I believe it.

*From Brenda Ueland's papers, the Minnesota Historical Society, courtesy the Schubert Club*

*This Brenda Ueland sampler is excerpted from Brenda My Darling: The Love Letters of Fridtjof Nansen to Brenda Ueland, Published by the UTNE Institute, Copyright ©2012.*

*Brenda Ueland's letter to save 2621 West 44<sup>th</sup> Street, her across the street neighbor,  
from demolition, written on October 24, 1984,  
Brenda's 93<sup>rd</sup> birthday*

Dear

A group of men want to build a parking ramp at 2621 West 44<sup>th</sup> Street. This is across the street from my house. It is a small house on a high lot. The first outrage they will commit is to cut down an utterly beautiful, ancient and flourishing maple tree.

Now first I want to tell you about our street, West 44<sup>th</sup> Street. It comes down a hill from the endearing and comforting Divine Science Church (Rev. Vernon Shields.) But then it wanders and bends somewhat. I mean it is not a straight crashing highway where cars zoom and rush to get straight downtown. It bends and charmingly and gently leads into Lake Harriet... We love our street and everybody who lives on it, and we will not have it uglified.

Then there are the friends and first-rate people who live on West Lake Harriet Boulevard where it climbs the hill to the bridge, enchanting houses looking over the wooded bank to the lake; Mr. M.F. Christiansen, the Hammonds, Sara and Bill Stout, Dr. Tom and Mary Rucker, and Jim Billings, who has gradually made his old house one of the most beautiful in the city.

Not all of our houses are expensive or in the least pretentious, but we are fond of all of them and especially of the people who live in them who are ALL grandly first-rate enough to see and care about the beauty of the place they live in. And about Lake Harriet, as perfect as a legend in a fairy tale!

Yours,

Brenda Ueland  
2620 West 44<sup>th</sup> Street  
Minneapolis, Minnesota