

Mary Alyce—The Berkeley Years
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Berkeley City Club
By Susan Austin

In 2010, Mary Alyce, along with 27 other local writers contributed to and helped publish *Roots and Tendrils: Prose and Poetry of a Berkeley Writers' Workshop*. Her beautiful photograph graces the cover, and three of her stirring essays are included within. One is entitled *Markers: An Essay*. Here is what she wrote about the markers that frequent our lives.

Our lives are filled with what we casually call markers. They can be inanimate objects, pets, people, places, events. Markers come in many forms—a flower pressed into a book, a family cat, a best friend. What they share in common is how they interweave the external world with our interior self in crafting meaning about our life's journey.

Markers (p132)

Mary Alyce was a marker in my life whose friendship crafted meaning in my life's journey—a friend who showed up at a time when I least expected to find one. The year was 2001. An invitation to the University Section Club's Fall Reception sat on my desk. Perhaps, I decided, it was time to see what this organization was all about. Mary Alyce, recently arrived with David from East Lansing, Michigan, must have made a similar decision.

At that time, the fall reception was held on the grounds of the Chancellor's home, a magnificent setting. Encircling the parameter of a lush green lawn, stood card tables, each with posters and smiling volunteers urging invitees to sign up for various interest groups. I headed to the table labeled Writers Workshop. Perhaps this group could help me with a book I had been researching. Signing my name on the New Members List, I glanced at the preceding name—Mary Alyce Pearson. Someone from the south, I concluded, certain that anyone with two names must be Southern—like Mary Beth or Polly Sue. A false assumption, I was soon to learn. After signing up with the Writers' Workshop, I joined a group of spectators watching a young man demonstrate Tai Chi, his long hair tied back in a ponytail. Under the shade of a giant oak stood a tall, slim, smiling woman, with a haircut I couldn't help but admire. Her nametag read "Mary Alyce Pearson." Mesmerized, the two of us stayed for the entire demonstration. Tai Chi had been on my "I'd-like-to-do-that-someday" list. Mary Alyce admitted a familiarity with the form from earlier days. Discovering that the instructor's name was Starfire clinched the deal for us. We made a pact to give it a try.

Thus began a weekly, then bi-weekly experience that Mary Alyce and I shared for more than ten years. An unspoken practice developed between us. Without a word, we would position ourselves side-by-side. Experiencing Tai Chi in tandem with Mary Alyce was indeed a special pleasure. Her grace, her athleticism and her serenity flowed out into the room, and I, standing closest to her, was the direct beneficiary. Perhaps you have to experience Tai Chi to fully understand. Think of it like being in the midst of a flock of birds, sweeping left, right, up, or down—together, in harmony. That's how it felt to have Mary Alyce at my side.

Several years ago, we began a new tradition at the conclusion of each Tai Chi class, a tradition which continues to this day—the after-class coffee time convening

right here in the Berkeley City Club where some of us were members, only a short walk from our class at the UC Rec Center. Mary Alyce became a regular at the City Club, eventually joined by either David, or her constant companion—Ellen Augustine.

Mary Alyce attended Tai Chi until it was no longer feasible. However, for a long time afterwards, whenever we were together, all I had to do was begin a classic Tai Chi move, and Mary Alyce was flowing again, graceful and present, her body remembering everything.

On that fall day at the Section Club reception years ago, Mary Alyce also signed up for two other interest groups—photography and tennis. You can see examples of her photography here today. Her close ups are especially compelling; gently guiding us to see things we might otherwise overlook. Her work was a regular part of the Photography Club's annual exhibition.

In Tennis Group, Mary Alyce could utilize her versatile athletic ability. Wherever she lived, tennis had been a big part of her life. In fact, while in Champagne Urbana, Mary Alyce and her friends formed a tennis group they named *The Graphite Magnolias*. Over the years *The Graphite Magnolias* went separate ways but that did not stop them from getting together on an annual basis. I always looked forward to the reports of their latest re-union, filled with new and more outrageous tales. Of course there was tennis, but also good wine and conversation, and the revival of precious friendships served as the heart and soul of these gatherings.

The first Monday of every month was reserved for Writers' Workshop, a group with a history dating back to the 1950s. As a member, Mary Alyce would regularly delight us with one of her essays. Her approach was to pick up on an event or observation, a *marker* if you will, and use it to spin a life lesson, a startling observation, or the telling of a comical family moment. Her story about finding a bat in the Pearson bedroom one night became *my* personal favorite. I could clearly envision Mary Alyce supervising David in the fine art of capturing and releasing the frightened winged creature.

Not every writer is a good critic. However, Mary Alyce could both write and critique. At the regular Writers' Workshop gatherings, we could count on her to contribute a thoughtful analysis of our work, always delivered with intelligence and kindness. On a personal note, she provided invaluable assistance on my first book, historical fiction for a young audience. Mary Alyce, with her background in teaching history, gave serious consideration to my questions about minute historical detail. Who else would care about the workings of a crystal set or what a woman would choose to wear on a trip to downtown Berkeley in 1923? Mary Alyce did, again and again.

At one point she decided to try her hand at writing for young children. She was the first person I knew who enrolled in and completed an online course. The product of that effort was wonderful, a story about a little girl and a dragon. She worked and worked her text, and then the two of us decided it was time to test the fruit of our efforts in the children's book market. We signed up for a writers' retreat held at Big Sur, sponsored by a children's book literary agency. I learned several things that weekend.

One—Mary Alyce made the best roommate in the world. Once she took out her hearing aids she'd promptly fall asleep, oblivious to any kind of racket I might make.

Two—she had a killer smile, especially after receiving glowing reviews from the agent who critiqued her story.

Three—she was great fun to shop with. On our way to Big Sur, we stopped by Carmel for some window-shopping. One thing led to another, and an hour later we emerged from one of Carmel’s smartest shops, each of us with a new jacket—mine red, with black and white buttons. Mary Alyce’s identical, but in hot pink.

Of her many activities, the **Read-Aloud Volunteer Program** remained close to her heart. The model was based on establishing one-on-one reading relationships between volunteers and children in Richmond and San Pablo Schools. Mary Alyce saw the power of those weekly reading and conversation sessions with her special kid—improved language skills, intellectual development and a fired up imagination. How she loved igniting that spark!

Friendships made later in life take on a different shape and texture than those established through the natural course of school days, childrearing or work life. For the two of us, our friendship developed at a time when we were free from the dual demands of family and profession. Early on we discovered those qualities that enrich any friendship—education, interests, professional experiences, values. And over the years, I learned about the Pearson children, Susan and Matthew, the beautiful lives they were creating for themselves, and of course, the thrill of her grandchildren’s arrival, one-by-one. First Toby, then Jane, and Zizi, all pure delight for Mary Alyce. She always shared the joy of her frequent visits to Chicago to be with her growing family.

I would hear about her work with the YWCA, especially during the period when she served as Chair of the YWCA Board. It was about that time that I noticed how simple things had become more difficult for Mary Alyce.

One of her essays, *Handling Life’s Little Grackles With Grace* is about how we deal with the unexpected in our lives, or as Mary Alyce might say—yet another of life’s markers. In the Midwest, the grackle is considered a pest—common, aggressive and loud. In her essay, Mary Alyce describes these birds as something like a street gang that steals food from other birds or chases them from their territory. She describes the dilemma of deciding what to do about a baby grackle that one-day fell from its nest onto her Champagne-Urbana deck. She could have left it there, and let nature take its course. Ultimately deciding to make this a teachable moment for Susan and Matthew, the tiny grackle is delivered with great care to the university veterinary clinic. Mary Alyce writes:

Whatever happened to that particular grackle, I’ll never know, but within me it survives as a symbol for the unwanted and the unexpected things that drop into our lives demanding decisions that seem neither easy nor clear-cut. There is nothing we can do to prevent grackles dropping onto life’s deck but it is what we do with them that makes all the difference.”

(p. 137)

Many years after she wrote that essay an unexpected and unwanted grackle dropped into Mary Alyce’s life. That slow, inevitable decline had become more apparent and real. As she wrote in her essay, there is nothing we can do to prevent the grackles from dropping into our lives. Now she had to decide how to make the most out of a bad situation.

When confronted with the harsh prognosis that explained the bewildering changes she had been experiencing, Mary Alyce expressed to me her greatest fear—the loss of independence. She could list those losses, one by one. Her precious Miata would be retired, the one that elicited a memorable shout from an enthusiastic college student

as she drove by: “Hot Mama.” Walks through Tilden Park would no longer be a solo affair, and so forth.

Enter Ellen Augustine—her companion of the next four years, whose enthusiastic and caring support helped Mary Alyce live those years as fully as possible. What a perfect match: Ellen, with her passion for politics and social justice and Mary Alyce who loved being swept up into Ellen’s world of fervor and ideas. With Ellen by her side, Mary Alyce continued long walks in Tilden, playing tennis, and bird watching. I ran into Ellen and Mary Alyce one afternoon in the Elmwood. They were heading for coffee, following their regular **Theology Group discussion at Newman Hall’s Holy Spirit Parish**, aglow with the intellectual stimulation that the group provided. With a wide circle of loving and compassionate friends, and Ellen’s steady support, Mary Alyce was able to continue her involvement in life’s greatest pleasures. Sadly, Ellen predeceased Mary Alyce.

Inevitably, as friendships will, our husbands became part of our shared experience. Mary Alyce treasured her world-wide travels with David. Africa, New Zealand, and Egypt were but a few of the trips during her Berkeley years. She loved opening her home to David’s students. Mary Alyce and David met here at UC Berkeley as undergraduates, and according to Mary Alyce, once she met David—that was it. No other man would do. She admired him deeply, his accomplishments, and his commitment to his field. Of course, as much as she admired and loved David, he was fully aware that he had to compete for that love with her adored cats—

Urbana, Champaign, and Emmanuel!

When she shared stories about their latest antics, her face mirrored the character of each cat. It was if she were channeling their particular personalities as the tale unwound. Her essay *Markers*, features one of her cats—White Sox—an ancient and beloved family member. White Sox was dying. In this essay, Mary Alyce reveals her deep appreciation for the precious gift of life. Her words seem a fitting conclusion to this eulogy:

White Sox’s twenty-one years lifetime brought memories
while pointing toward my own mortality. I noticed the falling
leaves out the window, autumn stripping the trees bare in
preparation for winter.

Twenty-one winters for her,
the beginning of the sixtieth for me.

Each day a gift. (p. 134)