

THE HUMANISM OF PEARL S. BUCK: THE THREADS OF SORROW

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SUMMARY

There are few women in the history of literature who have been more active in humanitarian projects than Pearl S. Buck. After spending the first four decades of her life in China, she moved to the United States and became an outspoken figure in the civil rights movement contributing articles regularly to the *Crisis*, the Monthly Magazine of the NAACP. She also spoke out against British colonialism, the wartime internment of Japanese Americans and the development of nuclear weapons, just to name a few of her causes. This paper focuses on her struggle to come to terms with her child's mental retardation and the implications it had on social reform in America.

Key Words: Pearl S. Buck, Nobel Prize, social welfare, mental retardation, human rights

Preface

In the history of literature, there are few novelists of Pearl S. Buck's stature who have dedicated their lives to humanitarian causes. After winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1932 and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1938, Buck's opinion on controversial issues was sought after by the intelligencia as well as by various minority circles. Even though Buck received bag loads of letters and requests, she took time to offer advice despite her other heavy responsibilities. Readers today often get the erroneous impression that Buck had always been outspoken against various injustices in America, but in fact her transformation into a vocal social critic involved a gradual and painful process. Before she returned to the United States accompanied by Richard Walsh, she had been a shy and unassuming woman who lacked even the confidence to deliver speeches in front of large audiences. But after Buck had spoken her mind concerning American missionary efforts in China, she became the center of controversy and could no longer avoid journalists and intellectuals who hounded her for her opinions on numerous religious and ideological issues. Buck's painfully honest biographical sketches of her parents and non-fictional accounts of her life in China convey the sense that she exposed her entire life for her readership, but there was a certain subject that remained hidden.

Buck struggled for decades before coming to terms with her child's mental retardation, and most readers remained unaware that many of her characters were modeled on her daughter Carol. Buck's relation with her handicapped child addressed many enduring and universal themes, yet virtually no other novelist had addressed such social issues until recently.¹⁾ *The Child Who Never Grew* was published first as an article in the *Ladies Home Journal* in May 1950 and a year later in hardcover by The John Day Company. Even to those familiar with Buck's writings, this deeply personal work is relatively unknown because it was largely overshadowed by her Chinese novels: *The Good Earth* (1932), *Pavilion of Women* (1946) and *Peony* (1948).²⁾ Yet this work played a pivotal role in her life because it impelled her to dive into numerous humanitarian projects. This article will trace the deep despair that awakened Buck's zeal as a social activist during the second half of her life.

The Threads of Sorrow

The frankness with which Buck discloses her stages of emotional suffering over her daughter's retardation is quite remarkable. She was, after all, the first prominent figure to publicly acknowledge that she had a daughter with severe mental retardation. "The first cry from my heart, when I knew that she would never be anything but a child was the age old cry that we all make before inevitable sorrow: 'Why must this happen to me?'"³⁾

Initially, when Buck realized that something was seriously wrong, her response was to seek experts who could offer a proper diagnosis. Even though neurology was just beginning to develop as a medical discipline, Buck sensed that there might be no cure for her daughter's

condition. As she visited a group of American pediatricians from Beijing and subjected her daughter to exhaustive tests at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester Minnesota, the doctors confirmed that there was nothing that could be done medically for Carol. Struggling against this knowledge, Buck turned frantically to writing producing the fifty pages of “A Chinese Woman Speaks.” It was really the only thing she could do. But Buck’s literary efforts could not protect her against what one of the doctors told her in a heavy accent. “You will wear out your life and beggar your family unless you give up hope and face the truth. This child will be a burden to you all your life. Get ready to bear the burden.”⁴⁾

For those not well-acquainted with Buck’s life, her progressive articles convey the sense that she tackled head on the ignorance of racial prejudice in America.⁵⁾ However, when it came to her feelings toward mental retardation, Buck was far more guarded. Her frustrations about raising a handicapped child were alluded to in some of her prewar novels and short stories. As Martha Jablow points out, Wang Lung’s sorrow in *The Good Earth* “that his eldest girl child neither spoke nor did those things which were right for her age” was clearly based upon Buck’s own experience.⁶⁾

Buck describes her inescapable sorrow in Theodore Harris’s biography, as follows.

For there are basically two kinds of sorrows, those which can be assuaged and those which cannot. The death of parents is sad, for they cannot be replaced, but it is not inescapable sorrow. . .The sorrows which can be assuaged are those which life can cover and heal. Those which cannot be assuaged are those which change life itself and in a way themselves make life. . .It is a stone thrown into the stream, as Browning put it, and the water must divide itself and accommodate itself, for it can be never remove the stone.⁷⁾

Hilary Spurling observes that in the early years of her daughter’s life, all of Buck’s activities were subordinated to Carol’s needs. Buck somehow managed to fulfill her teaching and household chores while taking care of Carol, but she complained that “none of it meant anything.” This was one of the most miserable periods of her life. Gradually Buck was able to develop endurance, but beneath her composure lurked uncomfortable emotions that bordered on irrational guilt. It was not until much later that Buck admitted that “despair so profound and absorbing poisons the whole system and destroys thought and energy.”⁸⁾ Buck’s suffering during this period seemed unbearable at times. “How often did I cry out in my heart that it would be better if my child died.”⁹⁾ But in hindsight she realized that it was herself rather than her child who was truly distressed. Because of the stigma against mental retardation, Buck and parents like herself felt that they had to conceal their children’s condition from society.

After several more years of indecision, the Bucks were forced to take drastic actions because of historical circumstances. With China caught up in political turmoil beginning in the late 1920’s, it became physically dangerous for the Bucks to remain in China. Even if they managed to avoid getting entangled in wars and revolutions, there were no adequate Chinese

institutions that could insure security for Carol under adverse circumstances. As Buck predicted, it was not until decades after the war that institutions around the world began aiming at training handicapped children to insure their security and to rehabilitate them into society.¹⁰⁾

Based on Buck's correspondence during this period, it seems that if everything had been left up to her, she would not have let Carol be institutionalized, but her husband insisted that it would be better to commit their daughter to an institution in the United States. This was the conventional thinking of the time. As Pearl was agonizing over what to do, violence erupted, and the entire family was nearly killed in the Nanjing incident. In March 1927, despite the U.S. consuls warning that all foreigners were in serious danger, the Bucks' had decided to remain within the city gates as the Nationalists began to shoot and pillage. Ever since she was a child, Pearl had been harassed and even experienced death threats, but as the Buck family huddled fearfully together in a small mud hut in an alley of Nanjing, she seemed to realize what remaining in China meant for her entire family. "When Grace and Pearl compared notes afterward, each found that the other had been planning to see that their children killed before their own lives were taken: 'Worse than death would be the realization that the children were in the hands of those maddened men.'"¹¹⁾

A dramatic shift in Buck's thinking occurred after the Nanjing incident. Not only did the Buck family lose all their possessions, Pearl left behind the entire manuscript of her first novel. This seems to have been one of the most difficult periods in Pearl's life. After a close brush with death, she seemed to stop in her tracks and look back over her first thirty-five years. Fleeing her home must have been horrifying, but at the same time, leaving her familiar surroundings gave Buck a kind of liberation. Her daughter's situation was unsolvable, but Buck had inherited the intelligence and tenacity of her parents. Ignorance and prejudice would present obstacles no matter where she lived. But rather than conform to the standards of her time, she would insist that institutions reform their policies, and that the average citizen adopt a more enlightened humanitarian stance.

Unsettling Revelations

Once Buck arrived in the United States, she began looking for an institution that would accept her handicapped child. Buck had great expectations for her home country and idealized the humanitarian spirit of democracy in her early writings since she was innocent of the racism and class tensions that were prevalent there. Her visit proved to be a rude awakening in more ways than one way. In fact, Buck's persistence in fighting for the rights of marginalized groups can be traced back to this period. Her sense of justice and her strong desire to raise standards to "where things ought to be" drove her on even though she met considerable opposition.

Buck's trip, in which she expended much energy and time trying to find a suitable home for Carol, forms the bulk of *The Child Who Never Grew*. In a short time, Buck became aware that discrimination against handicapped children in America took different forms than

what she had experienced in China. In the Yangzi valley where she had lived, the locals were harsh, but they openly expressed their views about her disabled child. The Chinese farmers she had met generally believed that it was the “Will of Heaven” that decided whether a person was going to be healthy or disabled, so the individual was not responsible for being born with a handicap. In her home country, however, Buck often learned how others perceived her child through hearsay. In *The Child Who Never Grew*, Buck described overhearing some women on the street whisper to each other that Carol was “nuts.”¹²⁾

In this intolerant atmosphere, committing her retarded child to an institution must have been dreadful. Buck describes in detail the abominable conditions of state institutions before World War II. “Their food was given to them on the floor and they [handicapped children] snatched it up. No effort was made to teach them toilet habits. The floors of cement were hosed two or three times a day. . . I was told that these children could be taught nothing, that they merely existed until they died.”¹³⁾ But as discouraging as her prospects were, at the time finding an institution for her child seemed like the right thing to do. In *The Child Who Never Grew*, Buck frequently alludes to her need to protect and offer Carol’s security in the event that she and her husband died due to some political upheaval. In the 1930’s and 40’s this was not conceivable. For a time Buck seemed to consider the possibility of remaining with Carol indefinitely, but her husband urged her to return to China quickly so she eventually chose one particular institution. Decades later when Buck recalled this period, she admitted that there were other options available to her, but she was not in the right frame of mind to consider them. Thus, as dissatisfied as she was, she continued to visit various facilities.

Buck made it clear in her writings that the most important criterion was the philosophy and personality of the director of the institution. “I ceased to look at equipment and housing. There must of course be space for play, and ample sunshine and fresh air.”¹⁴⁾ Meeting and talking with children who resided in these homes shaped her opinions about what her daughter really needed. Buck was particularly depressed by those children who were aware that they were handicapped. She noted the sadness and pathos of children who said, “I know I’m nuts,” or “I can’t never get married because I’m queer.”¹⁵⁾

But when Buck was on the verge of despair, she met Dr. Edward Ransom Johnstone of the Vineland Training School. “I told him about my child and what it was that I looked for, and he listened. There was something in the way he listened. He was sympathetic but not with effort. . . He said diffidently that he did not know whether I would be satisfied with his school. . . So we looked around and what I saw was that every child’s face lit when he came into the cottages.”¹⁶⁾

Finding a caring director was a great comfort to Buck but it was difficult to leave her daughter at Vineland Training School. The one month trial period was particularly stressful for Pearl and Carol. When Buck returned to visit her daughter, she was told that Carol had misbehaved and had to be physically restrained on several occasions. Carol was greatly agitated and would not let her mother go, so Buck went to Dr. Johnstone and requested that her daughter be allowed to return home with her. Dr. Johnstone listened patiently to Buck’s

complaints and seemed to commiserate with her, but firmly explained that Carol was “one of many” and could not behave as if she were “the only child.” This was difficult to accept, but Buck realized that the institution could not function if all the handicapped children were given preferential treatment.

Since *The Child Who Never Grew* was written two decades after Carol was institutionalized, it reveals how Buck’s thinking on various matters had changed. For example, in theory, Buck understood that handicapped individuals could be shielded from external threats, but whether these institutions actually offered safety or imprisonment depended on the staffs’ respect for these children. She also questioned the assumption that committing handicapped children to institutions was best for their psychological development. “To leave a child who cannot write a letter, who cannot even make known in words what she feels and needs, seemed to me at times the height of cruelty.”¹⁷⁾ Nevertheless, Buck did not doubt the sincerity of Dr. Johnson who earnestly pleaded that “You cannot shield your child from everything. She is a human creature and she must bear her little share too of what is common to all human life.”¹⁸⁾

Clearly Buck needed more time to make up her mind. Looking back at her decision to leave Carol behind in the Vineland Training School, Buck wrote, “If I had known how hard it was going to be, I simply couldn’t have done it. Left to my choice, I simply should have given up absolutely and without question.”¹⁹⁾ As Hilary Spurling suggests, her decision to institutionalize her daughter was financially risky as well. Buck had to borrow two thousand dollars from a friend on the Mission Board in New York to pay for her daughter’s living expenses. Thus, the submission of several of her essays and literary works was motivated by economic factors. Luckily, the publication of “A Chinese Woman Speaks” in *Asia Magazine* earned one hundred dollars, and her historical essay “China and the West” won the Laura L. Messenger Memorial Prize which was worth two hundred fifty dollars. These achievements should have given Buck something to rejoice about, but she was too miserable to stop for even a moment. Even the news that her first novel *East Wind, West Wind* was finally accepted by The John Day Company for publication after dozens of rejections was mainly significant to her for the royalties it brought in. Apparently, the fiction that she wrote in the 1920’s was not engrossing enough to ease her mind. Her husband’s preoccupation with his work and his acceptance of Carol’s arrangements drove a wedge between them. Spurling writes that “Pearl herself found no comparable relief at this point in or outside her marriage. Many of the magazine stories she wrote in the 1920’s (collected later in *The First Wife and Other Stories*) end with suicide, sexual bondage, or total loss of hope.”²⁰⁾

Fortunately, Buck’s period of enforced seclusion came to an abrupt end when she received a cable stating that *The Good Earth* had been selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club. Somewhat confused, Buck wrote back that she had never heard of the group. “Do they not know that I am not a member of their club?”²¹⁾ In fact, she had not even let her family know about *The Good Earth*. But when she received four thousand dollars from the organization and was told that ten thousand more copies of her novel would be printed, she began to realize the impact her second novel was making in the literary world. Buck could not have imagined

that in a little more than a year, she would be making a deposit of \$50,000 to Vineland for her daughter's lifetime provisions.²²⁾

From around the late 1920s, Pearl's marriage had become increasingly intolerable. There seem to have been various reasons for their gradual separation, but their difference in attitude toward institutionalizing Carol seems to have been one strong point of contention. There appears not to have been a day for Pearl in which she did not think about her daughter, whom she had left behind at Vineland. Pearl's correspondence with her closest friend, Emma, reveals her anxieties.

I think I can't bear for you to mention Carol. At John Day's request and to save myself from misinformation I wrote a short sketch of my life. But I could not and cannot mention Carol. It is not shame at all but something private and sacred, as sorrow must be. I am sore to the touch there and I cannot endure even the touch of sympathy. I suppose this is because I am not resigned and never can be. (29, July 1931)²³⁾

Judging from the fact that Buck wrote to Emma several times a month during this period, her physical separation from her daughter had become unbearable. Although Emma and a few acquaintances visited and sent her daughter packages from time to time, Buck could not feel at ease. Even the news that *The Good Earth* was receiving popular acclaim did not lift Buck's spirits. "If the success had come earlier, or if my life had been different as regards Carol, I think I would have been wildly thrilled. As it is nothing means overwhelmingly much to me."²⁴⁾

The physicians whom Buck saw suggested that having another child might ease her tension, but her apprehension that she might give birth to another handicapped child seemed to have made her hesitate. "When you have children, you never know what you are going to produce. They are strangers. . . I think if I had given birth to another child I would have had such a sense of responsibility for creating a new life that I would not have enjoyed it as much as I have taking children who are here anyway, and trying to make them happier, and in making them happy making myself happy, too."²⁵⁾

The letters that Buck wrote to her best friend during this period show her concern over Carol's "improvement." It seems that Buck herself believed from time to time that with the proper treatment and care her daughter could develop emotionally and perhaps even intellectually. Since Buck did not learn until 1959 that her daughter's condition was phenylketonuria, she could not have been aware of the full implications for Carol's future. Today it is possible for infants with this hereditary condition to regulate the inability to metabolize the amino acid phenylalanine, but in Buck's lifetime such treatment was not yet conceivable.

Coming out of her depression required much time--perhaps as much as two decades for Pearl Buck. Before she could write *The Child that Never Grew*, Buck struggled to come to terms with the limitations of her child's condition and develop a strong stance toward the rights

of handicapped people. During the 1930's and 40's, Buck grew both as a writer and a social activist, and meeting children with far more serious conditions than Carol's increased her empathy and stimulated her desire to use her newly acquired fame to create societies and institutions for various marginalized groups. "The primary problem of parents such as we are is to awaken the public to the rights that retarded children have. It is a strange thing that in our great friendly democracy these little retarded children...receive no attention and little help of any kind from state or community."²⁶⁾

Even if Buck had been a full-time social worker, it would have been difficult to match her endeavors during the next few decades. The list of over three hundred different awards for her humanitarian efforts continues to grow as foundations attach her name to their organizations. "She founded the Welcome House, the East and West Association, the Chinese Emergency Relief Committee, and the Pearl S. Buck Foundation itself, and she worked hard for such organizations as the NAACP, the Urban League, the Vineland Training School, and the National Council against Conscription, among many others, in the belief that individuals have an obligation to make a difference."²⁷⁾

As Martha Jablow points out, Buck's decision to publish her stigma and mental suffering helped to gather support for parents who had children like Carol as well as lobbyists and special interest groups. Buck was able to raise public awareness and lobby legislators through the National Association for Retardation Children during the last decades of her life. Moreover, her efforts put considerable pressure on the White House. Pearl Buck's friendship with John F. Kennedy is well-known. Like the Bucks, the Kennedys had tried to conceal Rosemary Kennedy's developmental problems from the press, but they were eventually able to come to terms with her handicap. In fact, JFK's sister, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, was instrumental in establishing the Special Olympics of 1968. Overcoming ignorance and prejudice took considerable time and effort, but in the year that Buck passed away (1973), the Rehabilitation Act was finally passed, prohibiting discrimination against handicapped persons taking part in programs funded by the State.²⁸⁾ Buck's efforts enabled the next generation to organize themselves, educate school boards and write legislators, so that handicapped children would be provided with individualized educational plans suited to their needs and capacities.

The Roots of Humanism

When one examines the range of Buck's humanitarian activities, one cannot deny that her upbringing among the Southern Presbyterian missionary community in China had a strong influence on her. Although she rejected the ethnocentrism and patronizing aspects of the missionaries, Buck retained their zeal for social action. When one examines her academic essays and literary works, one sees that many of the historical figures that she wrote about were men and woman who struggled to improve the living conditions of marginalized groups. Winning the Pulitzer and Nobel Prize brought her into close contact with the elite echelon of society, but Buck was also drawn toward activists whose talents were not restricted by class,

race or political ideology. One can see some parallels between Buck's humanism and the ideals of Renaissance humanism. As a lover of classical music, Buck must have been familiar with the lives of the great composers. Antonio Vivaldi, to name one, had not only been one of the greatest composers and virtuosos of his time, but he is also well-known for having worked as a priest in an orphanage for decades. In a time when disabilities were not socially acceptable, Vivaldi counseled these young orphans and trained a female music ensemble that became quite famous.²⁹⁾ Because of their physical deformities, the ensemble *Ospedale della Pietà* could not perform in public freely, but they became famous through the cantatas and concertos that Vivaldi composed for them. Like Buck, little is known about the Vivaldi's theology, but his art and philanthropy sealed his reputation for posterity.

Very often when writers attain celebrity status, they become less daring, but Buck was quite the opposite. She continually complained about the egalitarian ideals that were rarely observed in the United States. She witnessed segregation and felt the pervasiveness of Social Darwinism among intellectuals in prewar America. The United States was very much a class society in which "good breeding" was an essential qualification for social acceptability. Addressing the erroneous belief that mental retardation was related to family background, Buck complained that "The old stigma of 'something in the family' is all too often unjust."³⁰⁾ In this atmosphere even the president of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, hid his polio-crippled legs to sustain his public image.

Conclusion

Literary trends have come and gone, but few novelists today have been as active in humanitarian projects as Pearl Buck. To gain an appreciation of the scope of Buck's activities, it is useful to compare her to major novelists today. Blogs, twitter, and facebook have certainly facilitated open literary discussions that even include authors themselves. On the other hand, more than ever before, the popular media has been able to capitalize on the image of novelists by turning them into celebrities with large fan clubs. Buck herself became one of the most famous novelists of her time, but she kept on taking on challenging humanitarian projects. How many novelists today adopt dozens of inter-racial children while sitting on the board of half a dozen charitable organizations and committees? Once in awhile a famous novelist may donate some money after a natural disaster, but these actions are sporadic and rarely sustained over a lifetime. In fact, some postmodern writers act as if they are above getting involved in social issues. One can argue that the act of writing fiction is a form of social protest in its essence, and when novelists make strong political statements the media is forced to respond. But the truth of the matter is that a series of publicity stunts and donations cannot begin to tackle the myriad social problems of our complex and overpopulated world. With the escalation of the environmental crisis and with the leading democracies adopting protectionist policies, it will require more than just money to deal with the mass-migrations and scarcity of resources. The introspective novelist who captures the audience with entertaining

first personal narratives is unlikely to disappear, but social critics like Pearl Buck will continue to inspire future generations to realize that “the uncommitted life is not worth living; we either believe in something, or we don’t.”³¹⁾

¹⁾ Handicapped characters have been portrayed in novels but their role is mostly marginal or symbolic. More recently, Oe Kenzaburo has also been acclaimed by the Nobel Committee because he gave voice to handicapped individuals in many of his works.

²⁾ Gao, Xiongya *Pearl S. Buck's Chinese Women Characters* London: Associated University Press, p.9, 2000

³⁾ Buck, Pearl S., *The Child Who Never Grew*, Bethesda, Maryland: Woodbine House Reprint p.26, 1992

⁴⁾ Spurling, Hilary, *Pearl Buck in China, A Journey to the Good Earth* New York: Simon & Schuster, p.148, 2010

⁵⁾ Buck, Pearl S., Robeson, Esland Goode, *American Argument* New York: John Day Company, pp.92-93, 1949

⁶⁾ Jablow, Martha *Cara, Growing up with a Retarded Child* (Temple University Press p.10, 1982), 10

⁷⁾ Harris, Theodore F., *Pearl S. Buck: A Biography* London: Methuen & co. LTD, p.123, 1971

⁸⁾ Spurling, p.150

⁹⁾ *The Child Who Never Grew*, p.50

¹⁰⁾ 目黒輝美, 佐々木哲次郎, 泉浩徳『生きている、働いてる一障がい者の就労を地域で支える』大学教育出版, 岡山市, pp.33-43, 2012 Heller, Karl *Antonio Vivaldi: The Red Priest of Venice* Hong Kong: Amadeus Press, p.77 1997

¹¹⁾ Spurling, p.158

¹²⁾ She had never heard this slang since her parents did not use such words. *The Child Who Never Grew*, p.40

¹³⁾ *Ibid.*, pp.68-69

¹⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, p.67

¹⁵⁾ *Ibid.*, p.48

¹⁶⁾ *Ibid.*, p.70

¹⁷⁾ *Ibid.*, p.73

¹⁸⁾ *Ibid.*, p.76

¹⁹⁾ Spurling p.183

²⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, p.141

²¹⁾ *Ibid.*, p.192

²²⁾ Raessler p. 92

²³⁾ Buck's unconditional trust in Emma can be seen in these letters. "I [Pearl] do love you more than you [Emma] can know. I don't seem able to make intimate friends easily, and you are still my best in the world." Raessler, p.87. (5 July 1926) Emma Edmunds White Collection, Lipscomb Library, Randolph-Macon Woman's College.

²⁴⁾ March 1931

²⁵⁾ Harris p.186

²⁶⁾ *The Child Who Never Grew*, p.14

²⁷⁾ Conn, Peter "Welcome House: A Forty Year History" Elizabeth J. Lipscomb, Frances E. Webb, and Peter Conn Eds., *The Several Worlds of Pearl S. Buck* Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, p.78, 1992

²⁸⁾ *The Child Who Never Grew*, pp.14-19 Section 504

29) エドゥアルド レシーニョ, ダニーロ プレフーモ, カルロ ヴィターリ, 沢木和彦 (翻訳), 小畑恒夫 (翻訳)「バロックの巨匠 バッハ・ヴィヴァルディ・ヘンデル」音楽之友社, 東京, pp.96-98, 1990.

30) *The Child Who Never Grew*, p.3

31) La Farge, Ann *Pearl Buck* (American Women of Achievement Series), New York: Chelsea House Publishers, p.105, 1988

パールバック伝における知的障がい児教育の変容

パールバックはアメリカ人女性として、初めてノーベル文学賞を受賞し、戦前に世界のマスコミから注目をあびましたが、その生涯は知られざる苦悩と悲しみに満ちていました。幼児期から宣教師の娘として、中国に渡ったバックは、兄弟を次々と病で失い、義和団の乱や南京事件等の暴動に巻き込まれてしまいました。太平洋戦争の混乱を逃れる為、帰国したものの、戦後はマッカーシズムの「赤狩り」の標的となり、根拠のない容疑で屈辱を受けました。このような逆境の中でも、彼女は公民権運動や反核運動に参加し、執筆と福祉活動に力を注ぎました。

従来の研究では、バックの原動力を彼女の宗教観や政治的背景と結びつける傾向がありますが、手紙や日記を調査してみると、彼女が障害児の母であることが、彼女の倫理観に強い影響を与えたことが分かりました。