

Margaret “Peggy” McKenna

By Daniel Rowland

Peggy McKenna was born in Pennsylvania in 1947, and moved to Montville, Maine in 1971. With some time out working in New York City as a photographer, she spent most of her adult life photographing the life and people of Montville and Waldo County, working as staff photographer both for the Republican Journal (1980-83) and the Waldo Independent (1988-2002). She also worked extensively as a freelance photographer for a wide variety of publications and for her own studio. Her photographs, exhibited widely in Central Maine, reveal a deep respect both for her local place and for her subjects.

Peggy

Russian Orthodox Christianity, like many religions, celebrates the special gifts that each of God’s creatures brings to the world. Peggy McKenna brought the gift of love, of affection. Peggy was a virtuoso lover. I don’t mean this in a sexual sense, but in the sense that she gave unstinting affection to all of her friends and even her acquaintances. Everyone here has felt this affection, I am sure, and Wendy and I were special beneficiaries of Peggy’s love over many years. We are incredibly grateful for this gift, and it is an honor for us to share that gratitude today.

This affection shines forth in her photographs. Her images are love letters to her subjects and to her community. They are rooted in a deep respect for her subjects, a keen and sympathetic (but never sentimental) empathy which comes across in her images, so that her portraits convey much more than the outward appearance of her sitters. My memory of beloved neighbors like Charlie Choate and Norman Nash is shaped by Peggy’s portraits, images on our wall in Kentucky that I turn to many times a week. They have become in my mind Peggy’s portraits of them.

As I struggled to find and express the meaning of Peggy’s life and work, I turned with the help of Rich Puls to Wendell Berry of Kentucky, whose writings have always illuminated my Montville experiences more than those of any other writer, though he himself has never been near here. In a recent and now famous Jefferson lecture, Wendell offers moving insight as to what Peggy contributed to all of our lives, and why that contribution is so very important. He divides humanity into two classes, “boomers” who constantly move on and dream of ever more possessions and power, and “stickers” who “love the life they have made, and the place they have made it in.”

In brief, Berry saw the struggle between these forces as the central theme of our national life. The “stickers” are the base of his hope for the future of America and of humankind. They are moved by two ways of perceiving the world, affection and imagination, ways that have disappeared from our modern,

industrial, statistic-driven worldview. Affection means having “such love for a place and its life that they want to preserve it and remain in it.” Without affection, Berry wrote, the nation and its economy will destroy the country. And imagination is the human ability to perceive what we love, the object of our affection, with all our faculties, the heart as well as the mind, with appreciation for beauty and truth as well as for practical outcomes.

Though she probably never read Wendell’s essay, Peggy McKenna was a wonderful embodiment of a “sticker” and thus of our nation’s salvation. More than anyone I’ve known, she embodied the virtue of affection as Berry described it. Her natural inclination to affection, affection for us, her friends, her neighbors, and her family, for her small community of Montville and the not-much-larger community of Belfast and Waldo County, animated everything she did. It is this quality of affection that makes her photographs so moving, and so important to us all. They give us a loving portrait of our whole community, past and present. And they send a clear message of hope, of affection for place, for this place, far into the future.

A few weeks ago, Garrison Keillor on public radio’s “The Writer’s Almanac” read a recent poem by Wendell Berry, written very much in the same spirit of his lecture, that contains this invitation:

“...To you whoever

You may be, I say: “Come

Meaning to stay. Come

Willing to learn what this place,

Like no other, will ask of you...”

And he concludes:

“And so to you, whose lives

taken from this place

I cannot foretell, I say

“Come and treat it well.”

Peggy’s life was an acceptance of that invitation.