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Eunice Kennedy Shriver: Human Style

Frankly, I was shocked when I heard that Eunice Kennedy Shriver really died today. Sure, she was 88 years old and had suffered a series of strokes this year. But I am hard pressed to name a public figure who seemed to so effectively use every waking moment of their time than she did, that I was certain she'd not only pull through this but go on to recover and keep working. Some years back she had a terrible car accident. Many healed broken bones later, she was back in action.

Courage can often be the flip side of naïveté, in that often-times people see an endemic problem which they seek to help resolve without realizing how it may result in a lifetime commitment. Eunice Shriver was that sort of person - someone who grasped the horrifying depth of emotional suffering that other human beings had been enduring, and was so wired that it was only logical that she do everything she could to help them. To my mind she represents a generation of women relatives of powerful men who sought to effect positive change in the lives of others as a result of experiencing the same type of problems - like Betty Ford and alcohol and prescription pain medication addiction, or Nancy Reagan and Alzheimer's. Today, such women are easily overlooked simply because they lack an official title.

Mrs. Shriver grasped the suffering because she experienced it. Her pioneering effort in 1962 to first raise the truth about how not only American but world society mistreated and neglected human beings with a spectrum of mental and learning disabilities, the depth of silent emotional trauma experienced by the families of such people and her subsequent efforts in federal policy and the creation of the Special Olympics, came directly from her own family's trauma, coping and care for her sister Rosemary, who had a learning disability.



Eunice Kennedy Shriver with her brother President John F. Kennedy for a state visit in June of 1963. (from The Kennedy White House)

When the nine children of Joseph and Rose Kennedy were younger, it was easier to keep Rosemary engaged in their activities, but as she matured that became increasingly impossible, her abilities falling behind those of her siblings. Desperate to find some sort of treatment for Rosemary, Joe Kennedy pursued what was then an experimental procedure that some claimed offered hope - a frontal lobotomy. It offered no improvement and by some accounts worsened her condition. Admittedly luckier to be part of a family that had the money to provide Rosemary with attentive lifelong care, Mrs. Shriver made a point of always having her sister visit with the rest of her extended and nuclear family. By including her in such a natural way, Mrs. Shriver was proving to the wide circle of powerful and influential members of her family and their friends and colleagues that, despite being different, Rosemary - like all human beings, deserved equal respect.

Mrs. Shriver saw her sister's problem in the larger context of other families with the same problem. In a chilling but moving narration she provided for a short film on the subject, she recalled how families were once told to unburden their loved ones into the permanent imprisonment of institutions and to never think or speak about them again.

Watch Shriver's narrative at: <http://www.eunicekennedyshriver.org/videos/video/23>.

Born into great wealth and privilege, Mrs. Shriver could have retreated to her family homes in Cape Cod, Palm Beach or Maryland horse country and spent her time and money on herself.

Instead, she opened those homes to thousands of mentally handicapped people and their families. It was during one informal "summer camp" she hosted for some that she came to recognize their capacity for physical prowess and powerful athleticism and the positive change it brought to their lives. It was the genesis for the Special Olympics.

Half a century has passed since her brother Jack was President of the United States and the collective memory of "the Kennedys" has become essentially reduced to the tragedies of assassination and fatal plane accidents, personal scandals, fashionable clothes and the myth of a time when there was nothing but hope and beauty. Fine and good, but that's all just style stuff. Eunice was substance, recognizing that glamorous lifestyles and material wealth could only temporarily distract people if they had an otherwise emotionally bankrupt existence; genuine care for other humans is what provides a sustaining and satisfying fullness as one goes along in life. She never emotionally manipulated her mission with dramatic pauses or choked sobs or mawkish memories - she just got on with it.

Usually lost in the retold tales of Kennedy triumph are the facts that, in the midst of World War II, Eunice pursued and earned a degree in sociology, perhaps one of the first women in the country to do so. She did this not at Barnard or Vassar or Radcliffe, the usual colleges of Eastern establishment girls of that era's elite class, but way out in California, at Stanford University. Nor was it a high-minded ruse to find a husband, as women college graduates were often expected to do at that time. Instead, she went out to get jobs in her field - working as a social worker in a women's prison and then at a juvenile court.

Part of Mrs. Shriver's public appeal was her personal authenticity. I often thought hurriedly of another humanitarian -- Eleanor Roosevelt -- whenever I ran into Mrs. Shriver. She was always pushing back her un-styled white-gray-blond-brown hair from her forehead, always in clothes that seemed zig-zaggy and contrasting in design, in perpetual motion like her. She usually had a plain, oversized, overstuffed bag slung over one shoulder but pushed back behind her arm as she sailed forth to achieve some goal or take on some task. I always seemed to run into her in airports, where she was dashing to catch a plane or rushing to pick up her luggage to attend a conference or make a speech.

Her mind was too occupied with the problems of other people to waste time being pretension or snobbish. She was the antithesis of elitism. She was accessible and approachable. I had done some interviews with her over the years for various projects, including an oral history biography of her sister-in-law Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. When we saw each other, she invariably started off, "I know, I know - don't tell me. One of my son's names...oh....uh...Anthony, Anthony something!" and in recalling my last name, she would then remember my first name as well. I was really a nobody compared to the stars in her stellar orbit, but she seemed to insist on showing respect to every human she encountered. And it wasn't just flattering; it gave one pause to recognize the lesson - and to pass on the respect and concern to others, strangers or friends.

But that mind...always churning in a million directions. She seemed to take especial pride in the retention and recitation of the tiniest historical minutia. In 1998, while waiting for luggage at Logan, she asked what I was up to. Book tour for my biography of a forgotten activist First Lady - Florence Harding. "I know, I know. Harding's wife. He was president when I was born. She

helped start Alderson," Mrs. Shriver interrupted, her pointed finger pecking the air insistently. I was astounded that she could know such a truly obscure detail - which I thought I had uncovered: Mrs. Harding had indeed successfully lobbied to establish the first federal rehabilitation penitentiary for women, located in Alderson, West Virginia. Only later did I put it together that Alderson was where Mrs. Shriver was first employed as a social worker.

The last time I saw her, a few years ago - again in an airport, I told her she was "looking vibrant." I had meant the energy in her movement and shining clarity in her eyes. She tapped the swirl of dizzy colors on her blouse and glanced down at her striped pants. "Yeah? Sure, just like Jackie!" She brushed some fuzz from my jacket shoulder, then dashed off.

There's so much more to say about her. She even served as a First Lady, filling in for Jacqueline Kennedy at a state visit and dinner in the fall of 1963. In the end, however, one is left with an essence of her spirit. Simple, direct, serious, compassionate, real, intense, substantive, solid - an alchemy that forged Eunice's uniquely Human Style.