

A Book for Kathryn

For Kathryn Lawrence

May 14, 2008

Dear Kathryn,

I hope that I have spelled your name right. Please forgive me if not, but after all, we're strangers.

But the thing about strangers is: they are also people, and people are mostly alike. They all grow, play, work, die and grieve. Sometimes it is easier to make a gift for a stranger than it is for someone you know. This may seem curious to you, but you'll figure it out some time.

From what I've heard about you, you like to figure things out. That was like Susie, my wife. When one of her students was bored, she would say, "How can you be bored with so many things in the world to figure out?"

This is what Susie looked like when she was your age. She took her glasses off for this picture. Glasses get in the way sometimes. This little booklet is from me to you about Susie.

Mizpah,

Dick Rose



This is Susie and me after we were married thirty-nine years ago.



Yesterday, Susie died.



Susie would say it was something else to figure out. “Put your thinking hat on,” she would say.





Figuring something out depends on the kind of work we are able to do. We all take up different kinds of work, even strange kinds of work, like playing the zither or making zip-loc bags.

But in the most important kinds of work, people are alike: the works of growing, playing, dying and grieving. This is a work of grief. This may seem curious to you, but you'll figure it out later.

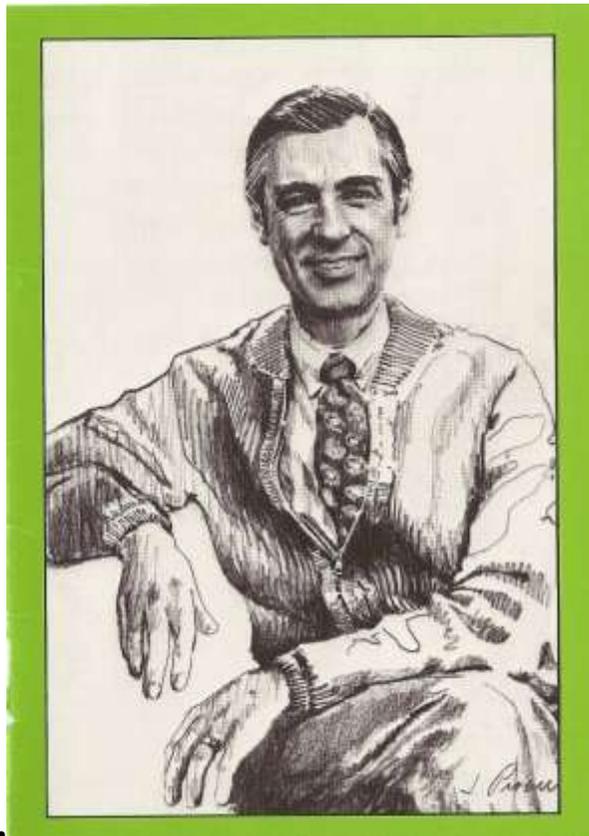
Susie took her work very seriously. She taught reading, math, science, social studies, art and music to seven and eight year-olds. She also taught modesty, courtesy, fairness, and the skills of play and imagination.

She said the first 8 years of life were the most important and that playing was one of the most important things you can do during those eight years. She believed that there was little difference between good work and play, only that "work is play for mortal stakes," as one of her favorite poets said.

There wasn't much television when Susie and I grew up, but when our two sons were growing up, she loved for them to watch Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers

`Mr. Rogers was also serious about play. Like Susie, he made up stories when he played. Sometimes the stories came from books.

Sometimes he just made them up as he went along. While he made up the stories, his pianist friend, Mr. Costa, would make up stories on the piano to go along with him.



That was like Susie and me.

Susie learned to make up stories from her mother, Virginia Bruch. She is a great story teller. You may want to show her this booklet some time.



Reading and telling stories can make you turn around sometimes.

Stories grow like babies. They have minds of their own. Susie took her stories and her babies very seriously indeed.



There were many stories about many cats.



Like the kittens born under the porch.



Susie always knew how to take care of them. All of her cats learned to be gentle because they were treated with kindness, like the animals in one of Susie’s favorite stories, *Tough Winter*.



Although some of them turned out more like *Tom Kitten*.



But others went on to greatness.



Susie loved to figure out games and puzzles. It was a cunning kind of work, and . . .



She was thrilled when she figured one out.



Susie's stories made people think of their own stories. Here's one I wrote once. It isn't Susie's story, but it has in it so much of what Susie told me, that I had to give her most of the credit.

S H U R A

b y

S u s a n I r e n e R o s e

AS TOLD TO RICHARD L. ROSE



The morning after her father disappeared,
Shura went to live with Aunt Reda.

Shura never liked to go to Aunt Reda's fine house.

Before breakfast, Aunt Reda polished her fine silver.
Without touching it, Shura put the silver back into velvet bags.

After breakfast, Aunt Reda washed her fine lace curtains.
Without tearing the curtains, Shura put the hooks back in.

Aunt Reda looked out the window at the dust from next door.
Shura looked over the dusty lot at the grassy hill behind it.

Aunt Reda took each plate from the china cabinet.
Shura wiped each plate and handed it back.

In the bedroom, Aunt Reda dusted the figurines
and Shura scraped sticky spots from the floor.

Before lunch, Aunt Reda strained the lentils while Shura scrubbed the counter.

They had just enough time after lunch, Aunt Reda said, for Shura to help her turn the mattresses and make the beds.

Aunt Reda showed Shura the dust that came through closed windows.

They spent the afternoon wiping the windowsills and tables.

As Shura scrubbed the kitchen counter for dinner, Aunt Reda said, “Cleanliness is next to godliness, my dear.”

After dinner, as Shura folded linens away into the cool, deep closet under the stairs, she saw a tiny door in the back wall.

When she pushed on the door, it swung back into a tunnel. Shura peered down the tunnel. It was shadowy, but not dark.

Aunt Reda was washing cups and saucers in the kitchen. Shura reached into the tunnel. It was powdery and soft.

She leaned a little more and suddenly slid down the tunnel, landing in a bin of powder and knocking over a coal scuttle

from the ledge. The scuttle bounced and clanked on the floor.

Aunt Reda heard a clanking in the basement.

She turned on the basement light and went downstairs.

Shura was sitting in the dust-bin at the bottom of the ash chute. She was gray all over from the ashes.

“Oh, Child!” was all that Aunt Reda said.

Aunt Reda told Shura to take off her shoes before going upstairs, but everywhere that she walked, Shura left ashes.

“Oh, Child!” Aunt Reda said again.

Shura watched the ashes float off like little islands as she sat down in the bathtub.

“Scrub till it’s all gone,” Aunt Reda told her as she closed the bathroom door. So Shura scrubbed her feet and her legs.

And she scrubbed her arms and her neck.

She reached behind her and scrubbed her back.

She scrubbed her face and stomach.

“Cleanliness is next to godliness,” she said.

She scrubbed her arms and neck and feet and legs and back and face and stomach all over again.

Then she did it again.

And again.

After some time, a strange thing happened.

Shura scrubbed herself away.

When Reda had swept the basement and washed the basement Stairs, and wiped the molding around the basement door, and vacuumed upstairs, and put all of her mops and brooms and buckets away, she thought of Shura.

Aunt Reda knocked on the bathroom door. Shura didn't answer, So she knocked again, but Shura didn't answer.

Aunt Reda peeked into the bathroom.

The sink and the floor and the bathtub were all fine and clean.
The toothbrushes and cups were put away just right.
The floor was dry and spotless.

But Shura was gone.

Reda looked behind the door.

Shura was not hiding there.

Reda looked out the bathroom window at the grassy hill,

But Shura was not there.

Reda ran back to the kitchen and looked at the cookie jar on
the counter and at Shura's little rocking chair under the table,

But Shura was not there.

Reda looked in all the rooms, but Shura was not in any of
them.

Outside, the wind blew dust from the empty lot into the air.

Reda ran outside, leaving the front door open behind her.

She ran around the house, past the red wagon and bicycle, but Shura was not there.

Reda came in through the kitchen, leaving the back door open behind her.

Reda went back to the bathroom and looked at the empty bathtub.

She opened the window and looked at the grassy hill.

“Shura!” she shouted. But Shura was not there.

She was not anywhere.

Reda left the house. She walked past the empty lot and up the grassy hill and looked out as far as she could see, but Shura was not anywhere.

The wind blew the dust through her house from the front door to the back door.

Reda knocked on the door of Anisha, her neighbor, who lived over the grassy hill, but Anisha did not come to the door.

Reda ran down the grassy hill and across the empty lot and up the steps of her front porch.

Inside her house, the red dust from the empty lot had settled on her fine chairs and tables, and stuck to the fine lace curtains and to the fine china on the cabinet, but Reda didn't notice.

She ran back to the bathroom. There, standing in the bathtub, covered with fine red dust and holding a towel, was her fine niece, Shura.

“Where have you been?” asked Aunt Reda.

“Right here, Aunt Reda,” said Shura. “I’ve been scrubbing and scrubbing because cleanliness is next to godliness.”

Aunt Reda looked out the open bathroom window. It wasn't dark yet on the grassy hill.

“Let's go outside, Shura,” she said. “We still have time to roll down the grassy hill, and when we come back in, you can rock in your chair while I make us some peppermints.”

And that's what they did.

THE END

This story needs pictures, but my work is more about words and music, as I said, so we'll have to leave *Shura* as she is for now.

In 2003, Susie and I had an idea.

It was about another story.

And, though we didn't know it then,

It was about you.



Susie kept her dollhouse for the daughter she never had.

So many stories lay behind the closed door.

Sometimes the people went out to the circus. Sometimes they became pioneers. Sometimes the children were left behind when their father went to war. Sometimes grandmother was baking a cake in the kitchen.

So many stories were behind the door.

Susie and her friends had told so many stories. When she was alone with the house, she made up more stories. The people used to visit their neighbors, whose house was so different. The father went to work in a general store. General stores were where people went when there was no supermarket.

But what did the store look like? What did Father do there?

Susie had always wanted to figure this out when she was little. Once, when she was older, she even began to make a general store, but then she'd put it away. We decided to finish Father's general store. We would make it in our basement and then bring it upstairs to be on the same street as the house where the family lived. Susie was sick, but she still wanted to figure the story out.





But who was it for?

Susie became more sick.

It wasn't for our sons.

It wasn't for me.

It had to be someone who could add to the stories, someone who would tell stories of her own, someone with a mind of her own—like you.

I'm sure that Susie would say this. She would tell you to use your good mind. And the best way you can do that is

To play.



In memoriam

A brief biography of Susan Irene Rose

Susan Irene Rose was born Susan Irene Bruch of Truman E. Bruch (deceased) and Virginia Irene Bruch in St. Mary's Hospital near Knoxville, Tennessee on May 1, 1945. She grew up in Alexandria, attended Mount Vernon Elementary School, Jefferson Junior High, and George Washington High School, from which she graduated in 1963. She attended the College of William and Mary from 1963 to 1967, graduated with a degree in Education, and began teaching in York County Schools. In 1964, she met Richard Rose at an activity of the First Christian Church in Alexandria and corresponded with him through college and her early teaching career in York County and Alexandria until they were married in the chapel at William and Mary by Rev. Chris Hobgood, Pastor of First Christian, on June 22, 1969. During her summer breaks as a college student, Susan worked on the preparation for publication of the correspondence of Thomas Jefferson at the National Archives under Dr. Oliver W. Holmes III. She retained an interest in Jefferson for the rest of her life, often taking groups of students to Monticello and teaching special units on pioneer life, Jefferson, and the travels of Lewis and Clark.

While living with her husband in Kaiserslautern, Germany, Susan taught Kindergarten at Vogelweh Army Base. Living and traveling in Europe was another adventure that she treasured in later years. Susan and her husband lived and worked in Alexandria for a year after their return from Germany. In 1971, after the birth of their first son, William Lyons Rose, they moved to Warrenton, Virginia. Robert Andrew Rose, their second son, was born in 1974. They lived and worked in Warrenton for the next 28 years. Because of the great variety of her assignments over her career in teaching and volunteering to work with children, Susan worked with over 16,000 students. She dealt with all elementary grades at one time or another but preferred second and third graders. As a teacher in the gifted program, she traveled around the county and enjoyed both teaching and learning from the students and other teachers. She had a quiet and understated

approach that settled most disputes with a nod or, if necessary, what she called her “T-look.”

Susan loved making things, whether costumes and bulletin boards for school, or baskets, quilts, pillows, puzzles, paintings, crochet, clay objects, or drawings. She studied ballet and modern dance and, as a band and orchestra member through public school and college, she learned to play piano, violin, and flute. She loved going to concerts and ballets and playing in the bell choir of the Warrenton Presbyterian Church.

In 1999 she began to suffer from Alzheimer’s Disease, but managed to fight it and continue working for another two years. From 1999 to 2008, Susan and her husband lived again in Alexandria. From 1999 to 2004, she enjoyed attending church at Fairlington Presbyterian Church and community events, visiting with her mother, who also lived on Howell Avenue, revisiting the places she had known while growing up in the Del Ray neighborhood. As the disease progressed, her activity was more limited. In December, 2005, she and her husband took an apartment in the independent living section of the Fountains at Washington House. She enjoyed the change in scene, participating in house activities as much as she could. She died in their apartment in 2008.

Susie was gentle and unassuming, but passionate about giving young children all of the opportunities and resources they needed to flourish. She always found time to push back the desks and let her students exercise their imaginations. She loved many things—William and Mary and its marching band, Star Trek, her many cats, flying in small planes, horse-riding, puzzles and games of all sorts, roller coasters, the space program, and even lesson planning. She was an omnivorous reader and made children’s literature both part of the school day and of bedtime stories. She wanted her students, and especially her sons, to become independent, to “use their good minds and imaginations”, and to enjoy life. She believed that love and consistent guidance in the first eight years of life determined everything that followed, but she did not like the idea that adults should “mold” children according to some plan or set of principles. She saw her task as providing the safety, guidance and creative stimulus that would help her

students and her own sons' talents to unfold in their own way and time. Robert Rose wrote:

My greatest thanks go to my parents for allowing me to think. I remember once when I was very young my parents told my brother and me that they would be proud of us no matter what we did when we grew up. My brother asked, "What if we become ditch diggers?" My mother immediately replied, "then you all will probably be the best ditch diggers around." The act of constant support and confidence in children can create truly powerful results in the long run, yet my parents gave me something else that made my upbringing very different from that of my friends. Like other children I had my assigned duties and basic rules to follow, however, for my friends it often seemed it didn't matter what they did as long as they followed the rules their parents gave them. For them, the rules were all that mattered. Breaking the rules often led to a harsher punishment than I would have received for a similar infraction. On the other hand, I sometimes received punishment for actions not explicitly prohibited by my rules. Rules seemed to play such an important role in the upbringing of my peers that often the rules themselves were governed by other rules (e.g. 2 weeks grounded for staying out past curfew). When I look back on my childhood I realize a tremendous gift. My parents called things on a case by case basis. They gave me more than rules. They gave me a sense of judgment. They didn't necessarily give me their sense of judgment, but rather they allowed me to develop my own sense of judgment. They never held back their opinions yet they gave me the space to become an individual. They never abandoned me and despite our differences they always gave me love. Absolute laws are a necessary means to run a country but they are a poor way to run a household.

Susie was always proud of her boys and excited at the beginning of every school year. It was her example that led her husband to become a teacher. She began leaving this earth in 1999, vanishing a little more each year for almost ten years. Now she lives in those she touched, helped, taught, mothered, and loved

Family Notes

The picture of Shura on the covers of the notebooks I gave to Bill and Rob is from a drawing of Susie at eight years of age. Originally, I was going to illustrate this story with pictures of her grandmother, Rentie, and rooms and items in houses where Susie lived. But I don't draw as well as Bill and Rob. While I put the story together, it is really Susie's story. She did not put the words on the page but she wrote it by providing the contents. She grew up in homes where she was frequently told that the old china and silver and other family items would one day all be hers. She came to realize that this was said because she was seen as the "end of the line," and sole recipient of family property upon the deaths of her aunts, grandmother, cousin and parents. Once she realized this, she was offended by the comment that it would all be hers and by the guilt that seemed to be associated with the comment. Her great-aunt, Blanche, who is Reda in the beginning of the story, was particularly proud of her heirlooms and had many of them, but her grandmother Rentie, who is Reda in the second half of the story, hadn't been able to keep as much. Her husband, Thomas Sullivan, lost so much during the Depression that the family had to move back to the family house, where they were not treated very well. Rentie loved the things she'd saved, like her dining room table, her desk, the grandfather clock, and china and the urns from her grandmother's wedding, and other things that Bill and Rob now have, because of the family memories they held.

The missing father mentioned at the beginning of the story is intended to raise questions for readers. Where does this story occur? The names suggest the Mideast or India. The disappearance of the father suggests political turmoil. Where was Shura's mother? Why was the aunt keeping Shura so busy? When Shura disappears, is this related to the disappearance of her father? The story is certainly about people who disappear, our grief for them, and our struggle to respond in some way. I wrote this story when Susie was sick, not gone, but I was grieving nonetheless.

Scrubbing, cleaning and heirloom conservancy held a small place in Susie's scheme of things. She didn't allow herself to become as concerned about these matters as her mother, Aunt Jo, and Great-aunt Blanche were. Susie took the attitude of her grandmother that one should keep a few memorable things and that, as there was no end to dusting and cleaning,

one should not aim for perfection. There were more important things to do, she often said. She liked a quotation (which I haven't found yet) about a woman who was consumed all of her life with dusting and cleaning but at the end of her life realized she was simply going to be someone else's dust. She was suspicious of elegant houses with polished surfaces. She would ask, "Does anyone live here?" She believed that houses should be lived in, strewn with many projects in different stages of completion.

The exclamation, "Oh, child!" was a favorite of Aunt Blanche. One time, Susie's great-uncle Jess¹ gave her a caterpillar, telling her to show Aunt Blanche because she would like to see it. When Susie took it into the parlor where the adults were talking, her great aunt screamed, "Oh Child! Take that out of the house!" Susie cried so much that her mother had a hard time getting to the bottom of it. She soon surmised that it was another one of Jess's practical jokes. Because Susie was angry at him for making her the butt of his humor, Jess later took a four-leaf clover from his wallet and gave it to her. She kept it.

One time, Susie investigated the coal pile in the basement at the Delray house. She had just been given new shoes. They were "ruined" after her adventure. Her mother was not amused. Another time, Susie went to a party, perhaps near the Alexandria County Day School. On the way home, in her party clothes, she and other children rolled down the grassy hill near the school. She also liked to run between the pine trees down the hill behind our house at Rock Springs. One time on a trip to Oklahoma, we stopped and ran down a hill near Loretta Lynn's Restaurant in Tennessee. Getting her clothes dirty was less important than running and rolling down a grassy hill.

As Reda becomes more alarmed, she changes from Susie's great-aunt to her grandmother. It was while her grandmother cooked that she used to rock in her little chair in the kitchen. She loved to watch her grandmother ("Rentie," for "Irene") make mashed potatoes and cake, but she particularly liked it when they made peppermints together. She later made a point of doing it a few times with Billy and Robby when they were little.

The subtext of this children's story is also based on Susie's ideas. Children are more important than the possessions and other goals that seem to make adults blind. To this I added my own subtext that adults should beware of such perverted thinking as apprehending

¹ Jess's other tricks regarding the clover; the eggs, the shot-gun house, the man at the window and the fire-cracker are described elsewhere in my collection of Susie's writings.

people because we are afraid of them or giving young people the mistaken idea that religious devotion should lead them to scrub themselves away. Like Susie and her grandmother, we must learn to see through children's eyes. What Reda noticed as she hunted for Shura was much different than what she had noticed before. The miracle is to see as others see. Shura is revealed by red dust², which is to say, her humanity. We don't know how or why her father has disappeared, or for how long, but Shura has finally been noticed by her aunt, and Reda has a new idea of what is fine.

Richard L. Rose

October 12, 2006

² The literal translation of "Adam" is "red earth."