

A Personal and Political Tribute to Phyllis Jacobson

May 29, 2010



IT'S A STAPLE of American comedians to make fun of in-laws in general and mothers-in-law in particular. But, in my case and with no offense to Michael, I could have married my husband simply for his parents.

In fact, I knew of Julie and Phyllis long before I met Michael. When I was at Princeton as a young woman, doing research on the U.S. left, I came across the book *The Negro and the American Labor Movement* edited by Julius Jacobson and written before the term African-American came into common and preferred usage. Because of this, I was already impressed when I met Michael Jacobson, the son of an American leftist – the quite-cool-and-interesting-to-me-sounding radical, “Third Camp Socialist” figure Julius Jacobson.

But, as I know well as a feminist, much as I loved and respected my father-in-law, there could and would have been no Julie *qua* respected left democratic socialist theorist and debater without Phyllis. They were a team: Phyllis-and-Julie, Julie-and-Phyllis, inseparable and linked at the hip even though they grew up in (and tried to transcend) a traditionally gendered, raced and classed world. In some ways, their lives were conventional in terms of gender roles: Phyllis did more of the cooking, taking care of the house, more of the raising of Michael (it was, after all, the 50s), more of the administrative work for their long-standing publication *New Politics* — and more of the typing, transcribing and editing of all Julie's articles. In other ways, though, their love – for I will always think of Phyllis and Julie's story as, at one level, a love story – transcended gender hierarchies and conventions. I saw this very clearly after Phyllis' tragic stroke when Julie, as so many men of his generation would never have done, refused to leave her bedside, setting up a telephone and bringing his books so that he could be by her side. He wouldn't even leave to go to the Socialist Scholars Conference one year, saying to me that “being with Phyllis was much more important, and what gave his life meaning.”

But why did Phyllis mean so much to me over the years I knew her, from the time we met when she was just about my age – i.e. in her 50s? The reasons are as much personal as political, emotional as much as if not more than intellectual. For, very soon after she came to know me, Phyllis accepted and loved me virtually as a daughter. She showered me with the unique combination of kindness and intelligence, dignity, and determination that I later learned marked her relationships with many

other people as well. What I admired so much in her was the grace she created, her utter commitment with Julie to enjoying pleasures from eating to listening to music and appreciating the beauty of art and antiques to traveling. At the same time, Phyllis shared with Julie a passionate commitment to justice and overcoming inequalities: their anti-Stalinist socialism involved a vision in which everyone, not just class, racial and gendered elites, could partake of the beauties of day-to-day life.

To capture both the personal and the political, the emotional and intellectual, aspects of my relationship with Phyllis, I'd like to share with you some vignettes and images, through the many years I knew my lovely, kind, and intelligent mother-in-law Phyllis Jacobson:

- One image goes back to when Michael and I were first together, and he was busy in the late 80s working in the City's budget office. I would call Phyllis some afternoons when I was upset about the pressures of the Columbia tenure process I was going through, or lonely because Michael had to work long hours, and I can hear Phyllis saying immediately, "Come right over" and my knowing I would have a cheery evening of dinner and conversation.
- And I can see Phyllis in my mind's eye bounding down the stairs cheerfully when I would come, saying "Hi child." If I complained about Michael to her (as I remember doing sometimes during that particularly stressful period), she would say, "Oh, I don't know what you do with someone like that."
- Then so many dinners, wonderful evenings, come back to mind with Michael and Julie and Phyllis and I - dinners when the conversation was truly at least 50 percent about food and 50 percent about politics. We'd debate whether Empire chickens were the best or Murray's, and whether Staubitz the butcher was too over-priced (as Phyllis would complain) and how to best cook some delicious dish Phyllis was making. Then the conversation would move as though seamlessly into politics and I can almost hear Phyllis' voice as she decried one "miserable" politician or another (from Clinton to Cheney and back again). And then we would move from debating food to debating a political question - like capital punishment. For some odd reason, Julie didn't share Phyllis, Michael and my opposition to capital punishment - and, at least on this issue, I would find Phyllis to be the better, more articulate and even fiercer debater than Julie.
- And then, after we'd talked about food and eaten and talked about politics, there were so many evenings when I can see the maps coming out as we'd plan summer trips that Phyllis and Julie took so many times, and which before our son Alexander's birth, for many years, we managed to take with them. Many people would think Phyllis and Julie had lots of money, but they might not know that both of them would economize all year (eating in pretty much all the time), saving all year for precious European voyages they loved). And then, many times, the four of us did meet up in the 14TH arrondissement in Paris on the Rue Boulard or sometimes outside Paris and even once (as I recall) in Venice, comparing notes and Phyllis saying enthusiastically "Let's do it" about going to particular monuments or art exhibits or restaurants or just to a local market or store we'd heard about.
- Then I remember when Alexander (whom Phyllis and Julie called "Sasha") was born, and a picture comes to mind of being in the Jacobsons' house where Michael and I used to change Alex's diaper on top of the washing machine. I can remember Phyllis shouting Julie's

nickname, "Yudi! Yudi! Come down here!" when we were about to change Alex because she wanted him to share with her the joys and sensuousness of her finally having become a grandmother.

- This is where some of these "personal" beautiful memories start to become sad, though, as I remember the tragic years after Phyllis became sick and was confined – this wonderful lively, smart, energetic woman – to the nursing home. Yet somehow, somehow – even from this horrific position when Phyllis' stroke left her unable to speak and to move – there was something, in all those years, of the same dignity that characterized Phyllis in the years when she was well. Anyone who came to visit Phyllis in the nursing home might know what I mean about a certain recognizable dignified smile that came onto her face even under these conditions – when she was no longer living in her beautiful home surrounded by lovely antiques, and when there was nothing to offer any of us by way of food or drink or greetings. And yet somehow, somehow, she would greet strangers and nurses with some of that same dignified poise and grace that characterized her in her better days – and she would still raise her fingers as though to make an older point of debate or argumentation. Michael and I could still make her laugh by telling her funny stories.

WHAT DIGNITY, what an amazing testament to the human spirit, to strength of will, does Phyllis offer to us not only in her younger and happier days but even through and up to the end.

But I want to leave you today not just with these images of Phyllis the beautiful and strong woman and person, but of Phyllis the intellectual. See, for example, her article "Black Outrage in Los Angeles" that she wrote for New Politics in summer, 1992, or the NP review she wrote in summer, 1997.

Thank you, Phyllis, for everything – for the love and role model you presented me, and for the belief in a better personal-and-political world that I still share, and for providing me inspiration for the rest of my life, as a mother, as a teacher, as a friend. I'll never ever forget you and what you meant to me: how could I?

[See here for further remembrances of Phyllis Jacobson.]

Footnotes