

Alice all over the place – Alice Beer, 1912 – 2011



Alice Beer was born in Vienna. She came to England in her early teens to improve her English and stayed because it was dangerous to return during the Nazi occupation. Later, her Viennese boyfriend, Franz, joined her; they married and settled in Leicester, where Alice became a kindergarten teacher. She became a Quaker in 1989 and pursued her main interests – pottery, poetry and peace – until she became too frail, only in the last few months of her life.

Confiding to a friend recently that I was feeling very confused because I didn't seem to be missing Alice as much as I thought I would – indeed as much as I thought I should – she suggested that maybe it was because she was still with me.

I thought a lot about that. I'm still thinking about it.

She was an inspirational character, at peace with herself and those around her. She had a quiet, shaky voice that made it difficult to hear her but listening carefully was always worth the patience – dismissing her as a rambling old biddy (which I have seen people do) was a big mistake! Her talk was as sharp and witty and deceptively simple as her poetry. Once she told me “When you walk with me, I can feel you changing down several gears”, and for me, slowing down to be with Alice was a real pleasure.

She saved me once, from one of those dark down days, just by walking in on me with her own excitement bursting out of her – and from then on, whenever she walked into a room I was in, she brought sheer joy in with her. And I don't believe my response to Alice's friendship is extraordinary.

We had rather adopted each other for 'away missions' (amongst which, Aldeburgh Poetry Festival every year), which we always looked forward to tremendously, grinning all over our faces when we met. And I've heard similar 'such a pleasure' stories from a lot of people, not just among poets, so I suspect she had 'adoptive' friends in all her pursuits: poetry, pottery, lino-printing, Quaker meetings, campaigning for peace. Were there more? I wouldn't be a bit surprised. She thrived on her independence and didn't want to be helped unless and until she asked for it and she didn't give up on anything she could still do provided she believed in it.

So here I am, looking around my house, and there are bits of Alice everywhere: gifts of pottery (twin mugs once when she thought I needed reminding to think better of my partner!), her letters – one, that I've never known the subject of but leave lying around so I'll come across it every once in a while, that says “Dear Anne, I hope it will work! Love Alice” – lots of copies of her poetry collection and her Christmas card published by *poetry pf*, photos, her hand-written and faintly-typed poems... all the usual stuff and lots of it. So I guess she is still with me.

When she was at her most frail at Aldeburgh, her second last year there, we had a long talk about meeting that moment, about coping with that first year, when one of us – of course there was never any doubt which one of us we were thinking of, but it seemed appropriately reverent (and the humour of it had its own quiet appeal) to keep our options open – wouldn't be there. She was positively intrigued by it and I soon had to scat to leave her alone with her enthusiasm and the pen and jotter she'd gotten out... This was the result:

For me, it's not upsetting
to talk about my death, or death.
For years now I've encountered him –
it is a he –
looking over a friend's shoulder
at me, mouthing: not just yet,
I'll come for you in time.
It's good to be familiar with him.

Friends speak of him, their voices hushed,
for fear it will unsettle;
there is no need, he usually
comes as a friend.
I hope he'll touch me
on the shoulder, say;
Time to go, Love,
as they do round here.

What I do fear is
years of being lost,
not knowing family or friends,
when night and day's the same,
no sense of good and bad.
I wonder where the spirit goes,
when all else does.

That last stanza read like a Charm against unpleasant odds. If I could say something to her now, I'd want to say, "It's all right, Alice – you're off the hook... It worked!"

The poetry she has written will continue to speak for itself. Speaking of Alice, I'll only be one of many who will miss her.

Anne Stewart

More on Alice Beer and to buy her publications: www.poetrypf.co.uk/alicebeerpage.html
A full interview with Alice Beer, by Marilyn Ricci, appears in Volume 2 of *My Life, My Faith* published by Leicester Quaker Press (soon to be republished in *Quaker Voices*).