

Pittsburgh Oral Histories
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FC

Interviewed by Barry Chad

Interviewed at the Jewish Community Center, Squirrel Hill

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Interviewer's Note

Attendance, as a child, at The Ethical Culture Schools in New York City; a home on Central Park; a cultured upbringing: "My vocabulary was three-miles-long." A life grounded in Education, a life in Teaching. You just sense that her charges in nursery school had to intuit the affection and concern that was being lavished on them. Warm and commonsensical approaches to teaching.

Interview

bc: Are you from Pittsburgh?

FC: No, I was born in Leipzig, Germany. I grew up in New York City. I went to college in Boston where I met my ex-husband. He was a native Pittsburgher. He was due to be drafted. We had to come back here for the draft and we ended up living in Pittsburgh.

bc: Leipzig? When did you get to the United States?

FC: I was three years old. My father had come originally from Czechoslovakia as a boy of 14, had practiced with his uncles in the raw fur trade in New York City and subsequently met my mother many years later when he was in his forties on a business trip to Leipzig, which was the fur center of Europe. My mother was German and a business partner's wife introduced them and my father proposed to my mother within 24 hours; but she didn't accept his proposal 'til a year later after correspondence. They came to the United State for their honeymoon.... My father traveled a great deal in connection with his business. He had founded a fur company. My mother did not want to be alone in her confinement; she wanted to be with her family. And so, they went back to Germany, and, in fact, even bought a house there. I was born in Leipzig, but I was an American citizen because, in those days, my mother became an American citizen by marrying my father and I automatically became one even though I was born on foreign soil. However, my father saw what was coming—in terms of Jewish people—and he got us out of there in 1933. Things were getting bad and my father could see it; he had better perspective because he wasn't right on top of it.

First we lived in St. Louis. I went to kindergarten in St. Louis, Principia Kindergarten. And then...the center of the fur trade became, instead of St. Louis (where my father had a whole big building), became New York City. My parents moved to New York City; and that's where I grew up. And I was fortunate enough

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to attend The Ethical Culture Schools there: it's a wonderful wonderful private school. It's very unusual: in Elementary School already we had a course in Ethics, which is not your usual offering in an elementary school. And, there was a marvelous storytelling lady who came around, a Mrs. Florence Klaber, who gave us stories from The Golden Bough and other tales; and they were discussed from an ethical point of view. And then we had Algernon D. Black, who was one of the leaders of the Ethical Culture Society and [who wrote] a book for young children on Ethics, [The First Book of Ethics] . It was a wonderful wonderful experience in terms of education. The movement still exists and the school still exists.

I was thrilled, just a few month ago: my daughter was on her way to Egypt. She lives in California. She needed to catch her flight to go with her group from New York. So she flew from California to New York; and we talked about rendezvousing in New York for a day. (She was arriving on a Sunday and didn't have to depart for Egypt 'til Tuesday. She wanted a day of rest in between.) And we talked about it—originally she wanted to go see a show—but Broadway is “dark” on Mondays. And I thought to myself after I hung up, Gee it would be so nice if she showed some interest in my childhood [in New York] and where I grew up and some of my early haunts. But I thought, Oh no: she wouldn't want to be interested in that; she'll find something else she wants to do. So I didn't even mention it. The very next phone call—in fact, I think, that evening—she called me and said, Mom, how would you feel about taking me.... [FC laughs.] And I said, [FC still laughing] Gee, I'm overwhelmed; I'd be delighted. In fact I was thinking that, but I was thinking you probably wouldn't be interested. She said, No, I'd really like to do that.

So, I left here on a Monday morning and arrived in New York in time for lunch and took her to lunch and then we went first to 2 West 64th Street where the Ethical Culture School and Society, the Elementary School is—they're in the same building. So I went to both the Sunday School and the Elementary School there. I showed her the building and I showed her the podium from which I both graduated from Sunday School and Elementary School. In fact, I even remembered the school song—much to my surprise. [FC laughs.] Then we proceeded on a bus up Central Park to where I had lived as a young child until about the time I was twelve.

We lived on Central Park. It was right at the time of the Lindbergh kidnapping. [The infant son of Charles A. Lindbergh and Anne Morrow Lindbergh was kidnapped on March 1, 1932. The child's body was found on May 12.] And this was the horror of my childhood because my parents talked about it incessantly: “Don't talk about family matters; don't talk about money when you're with other people.” Blah blah blah. “Don't talk to strangers.” They had me thoroughly panicked about it. The worst of it was we lived on the third floor of that particular apartment building and, when people walked along the park, the streetlamps would cast their reflections into my bedroom. Of course they were elongated and weird shadows because of the height difference and the angle, I guess. I never could explain this to anybody. I fell asleep every night absolutely in terror and exhaustion from the fear of the combination of the kidnapping and these

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shadows on my walls. Also, I had no contact with children my own age because both my father's family and my mother's family were in Europe. I had no cousins or aunts, uncles...to interact with.... [My mother did not] have friends with whose children [I could play]—which is how children make their first contacts.... So I had no idea of how to get along with other children. I was an only child. I cozied up to all the grownups—I'm sure much to their distress. [FC laughs loudly.] I had no idea of how to get along with other kids. My vocabulary was three-miles-long; and my social skills were less than an eighth-of-an-inch. [FC laughs again.] My father traveled all the time: he was up in Canada, buying furs...buying raw skins...that's what he dealt in...and buying them at auctions and from trappers.... So, most of the time, I was alone with my mother. We had nurses and governesses and so on: I still remember one: she'd roll her eyes up to heaven and say: "Lord, can this child talk!" And I hated her for that! But we also had a very nice, very pretty young Black lady, her name was Josey. I still remember her. I loved her.... She was a really sweet, wonderful, nice lady who seemed to like me which meant a lot to me. I wasn't allowed to have any pets. Even when I started school—and I went to the same school for twelve years—I started off on the wrong foot and I was never able to completely [overcome] that: I didn't know how to get along with kids; I had no idea. I didn't have a nuclear family. Holidays were spent eating with my mother at a restaurant. I was "a poor little rich girl."

bc: That's what you've been describing.

FC: [The school tried to urge my mother] to make "play dates" for me and that kind of thing...but, somehow, it just didn't work out.... [My mother] never took me to the theater except once. The one play I saw, that my parents paid for the ticket, was "Watch on the Rhine," that was the first play I ever really remember seeing. We didn't go to concerts. She did take me to movies. There was a movie theater called "The Thalia" on Broadway in the Eighties and they showed wonderful foreign movies: they were French and German. We went to that a lot. There was a wonderful series, "The Baker's Wife," and "Marius," and something else: I forget what the third one was...but they were marvelous.

bc: Did you speak German at home?

FC: My mother spoke German when she was angry at me: she'd resort to her native tongue.

bc: Obviously you're a very good-humored person. Obviously you've put your childhood experiences behind you.

FC: The wonderful thing about having a bad childhood [FC starts laughing] is that everything else is better! [We both laugh together.] I mean the worst parts of my life are better than my childhood because, at least now, I have some measure of control! No matter how bad my life has been as an adult and, at times, it's been pretty horrendous for me, I keep thinking: now I have some input. Then I didn't. In fact, I didn't even know what a so-called "normal life" was because I didn't lead one. And I've been fortunate: I finally learned how to make friends and I have a good group of friends.

bc: Obviously you got a really good education. Your parents were well-educated and very intelligent....

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FC: My father was not very educated. My father completed high school and night school. And, in fact, there was a huge gap, culturally and educationally, between my mother and my father. My mother never went to college *per se* but she went to what's known as a *gymnasium* which is the equivalent of a Junior College and she majored in foreign languages. Her native language was German, but she spoke English and French fluently. She spoke French so fluently and with the proper accent that the French thought she was French when she was in France. My father was Czechoslovakian. When he was a very young infant, his parents were quite well-to-do in Czechoslovakia and they had a house with separate wings and evidently the servants were in one wing and the nursery was in another. His parents were out for the evening. (I don't know whether this was before or after his real mother died.) But, one night, he got his leg caught between the slats of his crib (and a baby's bones are soft) and evidently it was in some very unnatural position all night and he was screaming and nobody heard him...but they never discovered it 'til he began to walk and then they realized one of the bones had been injured and so one leg never matured. One leg was seven inches shorter than the other. And all his life—in those days they didn't have plastics—he wore an extension on his one leg, on his right leg, that went from his foot to his upper thigh. He laced it on every morning. It weighed 20 pounds. My father weighed about 150-160 pounds. He did a lot of traveling, a lot of walking. He was a legend in the fur trade. He was very bright, an intelligent man. But his reading went as far as “The Reader's Digest.” He read that and he loved it; he read it religiously. He was well-informed on political events. He was well-informed on economic matters although he played the stock market very badly. But he was extremely successful in the fur trade and very well-respected. People would stop my mother in the streets and tell her how fabulous my father was. My mother, on the other hand, was very well-read, read all the classics. She loved classical music. She tried to take my father to concerts and lectures and he'd fall asleep and snore loudly; so she gave up.

All my life I did wear glasses. And, in fact, one of the problems of my childhood was my mother gave me the real German haircut. (My hair was perfectly straight when I was a child. I don't know when it got wavy.) It was chopped by the middle of my ear and I had these big, round, owlsh glasses and very thick that they made in those days. I felt like a very ugly duckling. So that didn't increase my self-confidence. Plus, I wasn't dressed like the other children.

bc: So, in '33 the family moved to the United States to St. Louis. You went to school in St. Louis, you said.

FC: I went to kindergarten, unsuccessfully. (Unsuccessfully already in kindergarten in St. Louis.) I got into terrible trouble there because...people are so tactless: they ask children stupid questions, like, How much do you love your mother? How much do you love your father? Well, when they came to my mother, I'd go like this. And when they came to my father, I'd go like that because my father was very warm with me. He'd make up stories when he was home on Saturday nights.... I'd give him three words that were utterly unconnected; and he'd weave a story around them or he'd tell me about lost dogs or something....

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He knew how to relate to me. He'd take me for walks. He'd take me to the zoo. He'd take me to the merry-go-round. He seemed to enjoy my company. My mother seemed to find it very burdensome. So I adored my father and I was very unhappy with my mother. I was very uncomfortable around her.

bc: Where in Boston did you go to college?

FC: Simmons. It's an all-girls school. It had a pretty good reputation. Some of it deserved.

bc: What did you study there?

FC: I majored in English and minored in Psychology; and then decided I'd like to teach nursery school. So, my last year they had an arrangement with the Nursery Training School of Boston, which was connected with Tufts [University]. They allowed me to get credit at Simmons for courses that I took at the Nursery Training School. By that time I had met my husband...and I wasn't about to leave Boston 'cause he was going to Harvard. Once I got married I worked as a nursery school teacher in the Boston area. That was my first job. I had a job in Lynn, Massachusetts, teaching nursery school. I'd take the train every day. I became a nursery school teacher: that's what I did. I taught at the Unitarian Church in Lynn—the nursery school there.

bc: How long did you teach nursery school?

FC: Most of my life. Until after I came to Pittsburgh. I even taught nursery school here. Then I went on to teach kindergarten.

bc: Your disposition, your personality make perfect sense now.

FC: Thank you. (I hope I should say "Thank you.")

bc: I'm guessing the kids loved you.

FC: Well, some did and some didn't. Most of them, I think, liked me anyway.

bc: I'm not even going to ask about the psychology behind your deciding to go into that field—considering what your own childhood was like....

FC: I think I wanted to prevent my children's childhood from being like that. [She laughs.]

bc: You must have been a great nursery school teacher.

FC: Well, some people thought so. You know: some kids and some teachers mesh and some don't. I had, hopefully, more successes than failures, but there are some kids that certainly didn't like me and weren't happy in my class.

bc: What age group were you working with?

FC: I was working with four-year-olds as a nursery school teacher and then five-year-olds as a kindergarten teacher. And I never graduated from that except in the Sunday School where I actually got up to the third grade in teaching. I especially liked being a nursery school teacher in the Head Start Program because, in those days, they had some very enlightened people running Head Start. I started teaching Head Start in 1963 or 4. They had some really wonderful early childhood people who were in charge of it. It changed over time. Now it's highly academic and it's not based on any child development that I know. It's terrible. I was so excited by, so happy in that program. There was a wonderful lady who deceased in the last few years named Eleanor Barry who headed the Head Start Program and she had a background...she knew young children and

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knew what was good for them and understood that young children learn by playing, not by having academics force-fed to them. (I mean supervised play, not just wild play: you know, a take-off on TV programs.) Head Start was a very enlightened, very well-run program under Eleanor Barry. She went to Bank Street [College of Education] herself. She was one my favorite bosses. She also had a wonderful philosophy about parents—that everybody is the best parent that they can be. If they're not so good, it relates to their own childhood and their own background. And this is true; and it's true of my mother too: there were reasons why she was the way she was. In some ways she was a very good parent: I always had excellent medical care, excellent dental care....

bc: After you left Boston, you settled here. Where did you teach nursery school here?

FC: My first job was at Rodef Shalom [Congregation]. I became the head teacher there. There was a three-year-old class and a four-year-old class as I remember. There were, at most, 50 between the two classes. [I was at Rodef Shalom] maybe three years, four years. From there I then taught the Unitarian nursery school. I taught half day--at one point I was teaching at Rodef Shalom in the morning and here, at this present location, it was a small JCC [Jewish Community Center] in the afternoon: I was teaching nursery school. I taught nursery school in the morning there, in the afternoon here. Then I taught out in Mount Lebanon at Temple Emmanuel nursery school.

bc: What's your philosophy of early childhood education?

FC: Well, as I said, I think young children learn through play. "Play"—it's a four-letter word, but it's not a dirty word. And I mean *guided* play; I don't mean just unsupervised...let them imitate the violent shows on TV &tc. &tc. I know about child development. I know about eye-hand coordination. I know about the importance of programs like gym where children learn "left" and "right" because that's very important to reading. (They don't seem to realize this in the public schools.) The sense of "left" and "right" is part of your learning to read. I don't think young children need to manipulate numbers over 20. They have ten fingers, ten toes; fine. I don't think you need to foist reading and mathematics on very young children. I think they'll know when they're ready for it. A teacher should be a facilitator—we're not making *pate de foie gras*.

bc: That's a charming image of force-feeding these kids.

FC: I think too much too soon is early turn-off. You want to make them successful. Each child has his own method of learning. Different children learn through different things: some learn auditorily; some learn through sight. You have to see what that child's mode of learning is and teach to that. You have to find out what their interests are. I think it's so important to read to them; it's not important to force them to learn how to read by teaching them the alphabet and the sound of the letters. It's important to read things that are appropriate for their age and their interests and get them to love books. My favorite time as a teacher was storytime. We talked about the stories; we looked at the pictures; we recapped them. This is where the children really learned and they learned to love

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books. The children I had, for the most part, became readers. They really loved books.

bc: How do you get a kid to pay attention?

FC: Well, because you read something about something that they're interested in to begin with and something that's appropriate for their age. And they just naturally pay attention.

bc: They want to.

FC: Yes! Right! And you dramatize as you read. You stop and pause and recap and let them be part of the story. We'd read stories like

"There was an old woman who swallowed a fly

I don't know why she swallowed that fly

Do you think she'll die?"

And we'd chorus that together. You let them participate in the story. You don't demand absolute silence—although, these days, with Velcro shoes, they're opening and closing them, and that sound in the background...! [She laughs.] We read humorous things. You read stories that are repetitive—where you sort of go "backwards" in the story.... Things that train their memory.

bc: How does an interested adult, not part of the family, overcome the frenetic pace of computers, of television, of all of the stimuli that are out there and actually get the child to look inward or to look outward in a sensible way? How do you overcome what the world is trying to do to the kid today?

FC: If I were a parent of today's child, I would severely limit the TV. I would, in fact, unplug it and hide it somewhere except for certain programs. In my day there were some wonderful things—like "Captain Kangaroo" which, I thought, was far superior to Fred Rogers although Rogers was okay. The "Ding Dong School" with Miss Frances was wonderful. And Jose Carey ["The Children's Corner" on WQED Pittsburgh] was good. (I knew Fred Rogers. I was on the same Board as he was. I reviewed young children's books for—I forget what it was called—a teachers' monthly publication.) Programs like that are good. "Sesame Street" was too "bang bang bang." [FC pounds the table in a staccato fashion to emphasize each of the "bangs."] Again there's very high stimulus which I personally didn't care for. I think some things can be fun: I don't think everything has to be aimed smack on, straight on for "education." Sometimes you approach it from an angle, you do better. I would limit the TV. I would limit the video games, the computer, and all those things. I think they're good learning things at times, but I think kids [have] much too much of them. I don't think they have enough interaction with each other. I don't think human beings any more have much interaction with each other: they're so busy with cell phones and computers; they're forgetting how to relate to one another. And, to me, I guess, because of the absence of this in my childhood, that's very important. We're losing our humanity: we're so interacting with machines. And, we're getting much too much input so that you can't feel any more: you're overwhelmed by what you're hearing.

bc: Is it appropriate to shield children from what's going on in the world today?

FC: How much can you shield them? Yes, it's very appropriate if you can manage it. To try to monitor what they're hearing and seeing and to at least let them discuss it with you if they have seen something, to open the doors....

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bc: That's what Fred Rogers always used to say: talk about this with the kids.

FC: Yes. Right, right. Find out what's on their mind, create an atmosphere in which they're comfortable asking questions, and, be willing to go into it with them and deal with them honestly at an appropriate level.

bc: When did you retire?

FC: I retired in 1992. I took early retirement.

bc: What have you been doing since then?

FC: I thought I was going to volunteer in the schools, but I'm just totally allergic to what's going on there; I can't bring myself to do it. And, as a volunteer, you have no say. You're told what to do and you're given the job the teacher doesn't want to do. I'm not in for that; sorry, I'm not that altruistic.

bc: Before we go on talking about your retirement, let me ask you: have you written a book? Have you thought about writing a book?

FC: Oh I thought about it, but there are so many books.... I have thought about it: I'm pretty good with words. (In fact I'm an ardent Scrabble player. Have you ever seen the game "Upwords"? It's delightful. It's like "Scrabble" except you can build the letters in a stack five high and do all sorts of interesting things with it.)

Anyway—what have I done? I've enjoyed my adulthood. I spent my whole life with young children and now I'm enjoying being an adult with other adults and I'm going to the Academy of Lifelong Learning and taking courses.... Helen Fay Rosenblum teaches a wonderful short story class where we read short stories that she gives us and then we discuss them. And she's the most gifted discussion leader I've ever known. She really brings out the best of everybody in the group. She chooses stories that you would not normally choose to read. I mean, most of them I would start reading and put down and pick up something else. But, by the time you're done and the class is over, you know why you've read them. I've taken some Shakespeare courses. (Unfortunately one of the most gifted people at teaching Shakespeare, [Richard] Tobias, just died recently. He was a Professor at Pitt [the University of Pittsburgh], and he was marvelous. There's Alan Lefkowitz who also teaches Shakespeare, who's excellent.)

I love being home. I've created a home that I very much love. It's much too large for one person, but I'm pretty social and I entertain a lot. I've lived in the same house since '63 and I've created it according to what I want. I feel like a turtle and that's my shell. [She laughs.] When the world becomes too much for me, I can retreat into it. I put it together myself. I remodeled it. I did some of the labor myself. I scraped paint off brick in the basement and washed walls and did a lot of things. I designed the remodeling of the kitchen and putting a powder room in on the first floor and all sorts of design things within the kitchen. I'm proud of it and I enjoy living in it. I prefer it to any place I can travel to. Plus, my grandchildren are in the city....

I belong to a group that reads plays and discusses them. I belong to a book club. I usher for three theaters: I usher for the Public Theater, the City Theater, and the Irish Classical Theater. You only usher once for each play unless you want to usher more and you get to see the play free. You also often get the best seats:

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you're allowed to take any seats that aren't filled. And that's very nice because I usher mainly for matinees in which the elderly people go and so I see a lot of my friends. It's a pleasant experience. You have to get there about an hour before the performance and sometimes you have to stuff programs—most of the time you don't—you just sit around and talk to the other ushers, and you have an ushers' meeting for a few minutes and then you go in and usher.

bc: What shows have you seen that really bowled you over?

FC: The performance of "Cabaret" at the Public Theater. It was marvelous, just wonderful. I've ushered, by the way, for many years. It's something I enjoy doing.

bc: What else do you do to keep busy?

FC: I swim a mile everyday. I swim seven days a week.

I garden. (I don't know that I like to garden: I like the results of the gardening.)
[FC laughs.]

bc: You've been here since the '50s in Pittsburgh. How has the city changed?

FC: Well, for me, it's a lot better. I came here I didn't know how to drive. There were constant strikes, streetcar strikes, steel strikes that impacted the city dreadfully. Oakland smelled of rotten eggs, all of Oakland, because of the steel mills. You had a small middle-class population relatively. You had a proliferation of steelworkers and low socio-economic groups. Then you had your "Captains of Industry" who, most of the time, didn't stay here, who traveled or who had homes elsewhere. And your middle-class amenities were not very great. There was Ben Gross's restaurant...there were about four or five good middle-class, upper-middle-class restaurants. At one point you had occasional foreign films. Then for a while you had a movie house in Squirrel Hill that did show them. Your amenities, so far as entertainment, you always had some good theaters, a very good symphony. (I'm not an opera-goer. Opera stories are so silly. I don't speak Italian or French. The basic stories are usually so silly that I can't put up with them.) I could afford so little when I came here.

Learning to drive was a big, liberating thing: not having to wait for streetcars and buses. Our first car was a [Nash]. I think I learned to drive in a borrowed car, and it had a shift. I had to take my driver's test three times. [FC laughs heartily through these descriptions of her driver's tests.] I was so nervous. First time I made the mistake of wearing heels. I was so nervous that my heels were clacking against the floorboards, and that further unnerved me. I put the car into gear and it leaped forward and the policeman's hat flew in the backseat. Another time I took the test and the policeman was congratulating me that I had done a good job. (I even did the horrible parking thing.) It was on Washington Road in those days. And we're coming in and he's congratulating me and I go through the final stop sign--because I'm listening to him congratulate me; and I failed for that reason. Anyway, as I said, I took it innumerable times; it was embarrassing, but I'm a reasonably good and very cautious driver. [But] Pittsburgh is a difficult city [for driving] because of the hills and the topography and because it's a triangle.

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[Pittsburgh] has gotten better in terms of middle-class life certainly. Now it's full of middle-class amenities: we have lots of theater (and most of it is pretty good along with the colleges having plays [which they did in the past as well]). The other thing is...people were very oriented to their own ethnic group and their own neighborhood.

Basically I grew up with a Humanist philosophy: eventually, there was a small Ethical Society here [in Pittsburgh] and I belonged to that; I made some friends. But that disbanded: it never really had a leader *per se*. Then I went to the Unitarian Church, not as a church, but because they had something called the Allegheny Roundtable where they discussed political and social issues and I also found it a comfortable social atmosphere because mainly the members were teachers, professors—people I felt comfortable with. It attracted people many of whom were essentially Humanist.... There were many mixed couples, mixed marriages and that kind of thing. So, I was comfortable there, where I was not comfortable in the various shuls. It was just more than I...it's like having been starved and then being served a big meal: it just didn't sit well. It was more than I could take; I wasn't used to it. [Growing up], I had been sent to a Christian Science Sunday School; I'd been sent to Hebrew School; and I had rebelled against both. And then my mother felt that I should have something, so they sent me to Ethical Culture Sunday School and I loved that. That was like a course, over years, in comparative religions.

bc: Ethical Culture obviously had a profound intellectual, spiritual, and emotional impact on you.

FC: For me it did. What they said, at the beginning and at the end, is that, almost every religion has something good in it: take what you need and make it your own. And, establish some priorities for yourself, establish a set of values. And then live by them. That made sense to me.

The Ethical Society in New York (and I showed my daughter this)...over the podium there's an inscription that says, "The Place Where Men Meet to Seek the Highest is Holy Ground." In other words, the holiness comes from the goodness of Man. And I firmly believe that. I think you only come this way once. I don't believe in an afterlife. And my philosophy is to do as much good and as little harm as possible while I'm here.