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## Welcoming Remarks and Reflections: Kate Millett Memorial Service

Eleanor Pam  
*Veteran Feminists of America*, eleanorpam@aol.com

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## WELCOMING REMARKS AND REFLECTIONS: KATE MILLETT MEMORIAL SERVICE

Eleanor Pam

*Veteran Feminists of America*

**T**HANK YOU ALL FOR COMING OUT TODAY in memory of Kate Millett.

We are profoundly grateful to the Church elders and staff who have helped us tremendously by providing us with this beautiful space and showing us so much warmth, hospitality, and generosity.

We thank the Veteran Feminists of America (VFA), which has organized and is hosting this memorial together with Sophie Keir--Kate's remarkable partner and spouse. VFA is an organization Kate loved and supported from the day it was founded--she was, in fact, one of its founders.

We share great sadness with Kate's family, who have come in force from out of town. Kate's niece, Lisa Millett Rau, representing the family, will talk more about them when she speaks in a few minutes.

And we thank our great line up of speakers and performers who will honor and mourn Kate this afternoon--through the joy and magic of special music and language.

Finally, we extend condolences to Sophie Keir, who prolonged Kate's life and gave her quality of life--who provided love, stability, safe harbor, and companionship. Sophie was Kate's home and her heart. If there is any comfort to be found in the awful fact of Kate Millett's death, it is this: The last thing Sophie heard from Kate was her laughter; the last thing Kate heard was Sophie's laughter. Thank you, Sophie, for keeping Kate alive, well, and happy--despite so many challenges--and for 39 years--together carrying the torch of her work forward.

### **Personal Reflections on Kate Millett**

We remember and pay tribute today to a feminist who was a trailblazer and a rebel, a troublemaker-- an anarchist and a gangster.

Kate Millett was many other things, too, as we all know, and those are well documented in the history books. But she grooved on the idea of herself as gangster--and savored the image of being tough. She wasn't that at all.

Kate was sensitive and shy, without normative layers of protection from outside hurts and assaults. It seemed as if she wore her skin from the inside out. This exquisite sensibility served her well as an artist and writer, but her personal vulnerability was often an open wound.

This is a hard loss, putting an end to an almost 60-year relationship. I know, I know...people say that Kate will live on forever. But that doesn't help. I miss her.

As I have said and written many times: she was my intellectual sparring partner and my very beloved friend--interwoven within the spine of my own life and personal history.

In our early years, we ran around Greenwich Village together, both of us so young and full of promise.

Well, to be fair, I wasn't quite sure how much promise Kate had. She lived on the Bowery and had very little money. More worrisome than that, she embraced downward mobility, had a mindset, it seemed to me, of reverse elitism. It actually thrilled her to live as and where she did. What an odd duck, I thought.

I didn't understand, couldn't understand--born and raised, as I was, in the slums of Brooklyn--an ambitious kid just out of college, dreaming of success.

The common goal of everyone from my neighborhood was a driving desire to get out of the slums, not aspire to living in one. What was wrong with her?

Well, I knew immediately what was right with her! She was undeniably a genius--with an elegant mind and a steel-trap memory. Everyone in our circle was smart, but Kate--Kate was in another league! She did not just read books; she ingested them--swallowed them whole like a literary glutton whose appetite is never satisfied.

Who was she then, this alien expat from St. Paul? This scholar and artist who lived in her head and seemed to inhabit a universe of her own--one that was not always intelligible to me--quirky, disquieting, interesting, provocative, amusing, intense, and very, very naughty. An original, for sure.

Kate was definitely not your "everything in moderation--nothing in excess" kind of gal, as Socrates counseled. Whatever she did was extreme. She lived without a safety net or security, no apparent means or obvious future. A very young woman, alone. Living a marginal existence--dangerously on the edge.

But she was game, looking forward to the next party or the next book to be read--her life an unfolding adventure or, as she said later, introducing me to an entirely new vocabulary--a happening!

Kate Millett, to her core, was a downtown artist. She was terribly shaken when, in her later years, the city [*New York City*] evicted and relocated her, kicking and screaming, heartsick and furious about losing her home. She was probably the only person in the world who believed that being evicted from the Bowery was a step down.

Kate was very pale in those early days, and I often feared she was ill, worrying about her as I always did and would for almost six decades. Her pallor so alarmed me that I mistook it for sickness, not the love-sickness it probably was. She fell in love easily and often--and she suffered intensely from this malady.

But when Kate discovered feminism, her passion for this new cause burned bright, different from the flameouts of her personal relationships that so often brought her grief and brought her down. For her, romantic love was a bad drug, an opportunistic infection that took hold of her soul. She just wasn't good at it.

But she was good at feminism. Psychically, she suddenly seemed turbo-charged. And just as suddenly--she became famous.

One minute, she was slaving away at her doctoral dissertation, just like the rest of us, and the next minute she was the Mao Tse Tung of Women's Liberation, the principal theoretician of the women's movement, one of the 20 most important persons of the 20th Century, according to the *New York Times* and her likeness graced the cover of *Time* magazine.

What? Who? Our Katie? No way.

Well, yes-way, actually. What changed everything was THE BOOK!

That miraculous, life-altering tome which had been her Ph.D. dissertation but later would be described as the "bible of the women's movement."

### ***Sexual Politics***

Or *Sex Pol*, as Kate called it. Transformative, brilliant, groundbreaking.

Ten more books would eventually follow and, as always, a ton of art.

Andrea Dworkin said:

I cannot think of anyone who accomplished what Kate Millett did with this one book. It remains the alpha and omega of the women's movement. Anything that feminists have done is foreshadowed, predicted, or encouraged by *Sexual Politics*.

Kate held the publication party for *Sex Pol* at a dive in the Bowery, CBGBs, right down the street from her apartment--of course. It was the most way-out book launching I ever attended, but that's another story.

Some years ago, Kate sent me a letter. She wrote:

I never have said thank you enough. Surely have not been sentimental--have held onto our old tough-girl stance from when we were New York kids just out of college. So, here's a thank you note--already I feel myself clamming up.

This was quintessential Kate in her middle years, looking at herself over her own left shoulder with that fierce intelligence, observing her faults with an unsparing eye, trying to be more explicitly human, but always in a struggle against herself, wryly confessional.

And then--at the very moment of reaching out, she shuts down, retreats...runs away. "So, here's a thank you note--already, I feel myself clamming up."

Years later, when we were morphing into our new identities as movement elders and foremothers--whatever that is--things changed. Kate now began each letter and conversation with a simple declaration, "I love you very much."

Her handwriting wavered, no longer the bold, black recognizable lines of her idiosyncratic artistry--but scraggly--wandering across and down the page at a diffident pace.

Her speech was halting with many silences. She had fewer words but said so much more, meaningful to me, than when the sentences gushed from her pen to stun a nation. Her old struggle against self-incriminating sentimentality was gone.

Now Kate herself is gone, and that is unimaginable.

So, I'll say it back, sweet Kate, our very own Catherine the Great ...I say it, unlike you for too many years, without angst or struggle or self-consciousness.

I love you very much, too.

Well done, Katie, your life--so very well done!

Goodbye, old friend.

#### **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

**Eleanor Pam** is the president of Veteran Feminists of America. She was a full professor and dean at the City University of New York.

<https://www.veteranfeministsofamerica.org/legacy/EleanorPam.htm>

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