

Peace in the wake of Change

Never again shall we gaze at Penn's peace sign with calm, quiet equanimity. And never again shall an autumn pass through Penn without empty echoes. Never is Penn's peace completely peaceful.

One year and one week ago Kathy Change stopped dancing. A life of perpetual movement came to a shocking standstill, and Penn lost its most vivid and enigmatic personali-



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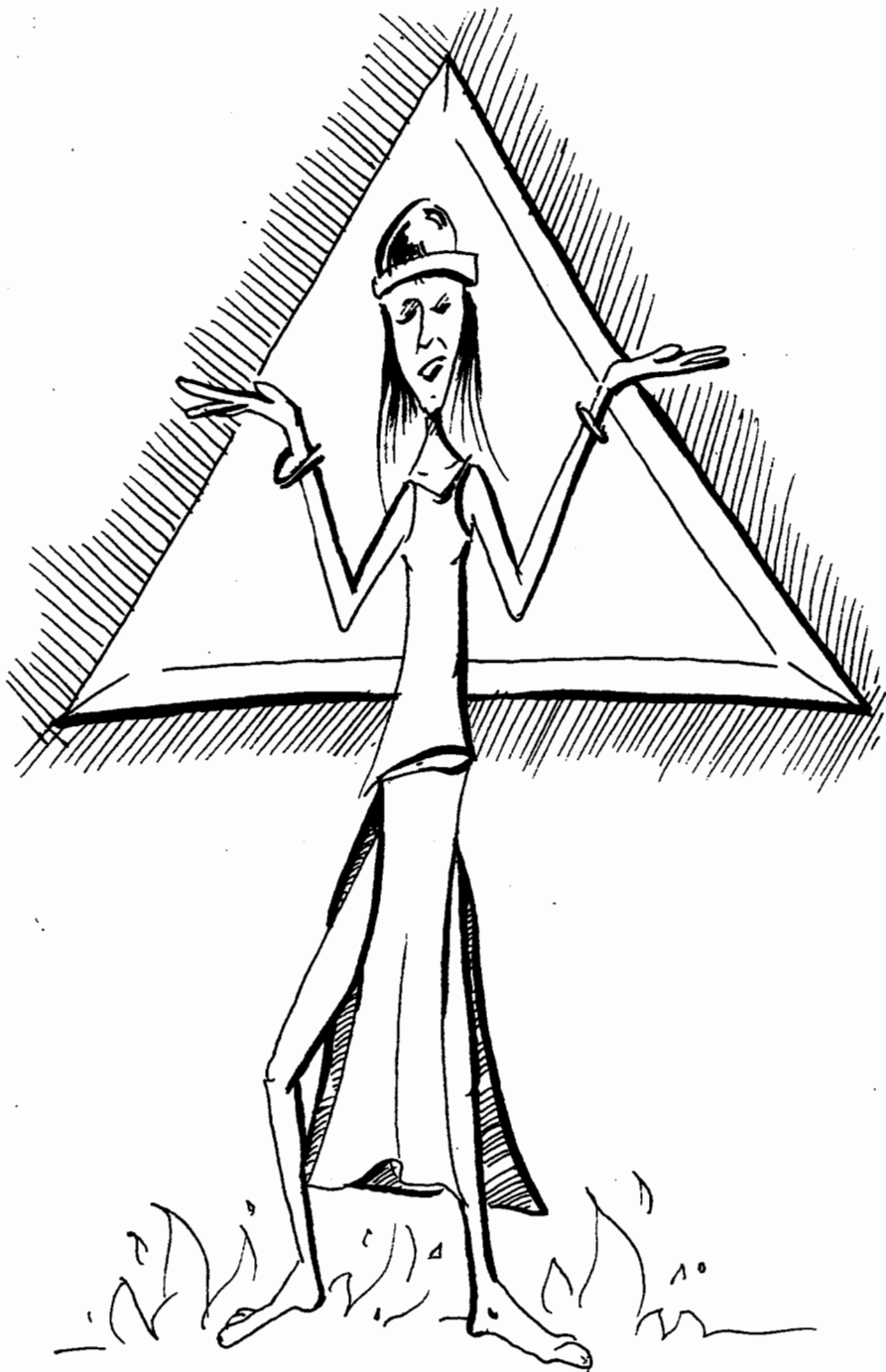
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ty. She had the true revolutionary spirit, a brief spark of light in the blithe, gray weather of academe. Change exposed an absence in the spirit of our age, a naked vitality that recalled decades of protest past.

She transcended herself to embody all that she symbolized. Perhaps a symbol of dissent in the conformist context of a college campus; or perhaps a symbol of the '60s for our decade obsessed with anachronism. Change was a symbol of something, or many things. At once lighthearted and serious, flamboyant and peripheral, Change remained a mystery to students... and probably to herself.

Change was derided for the broadness of her thinking. When her manifesto was published, the gurus said she failed to systemize her philosophy in a logical manner. But as usual, the arm-patch pundits were far mistaken.

No, Change was not a philosopher, nor did she pretend to be. Nor was she a politician, a rabble-rouser or a revolutionary in a military sense. Change was a rebel, plain and simple, against any dangerous orthodoxy which might take hold of susceptible young minds. In other words, she had no single adversary, but was never lacking for material to protest.



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She believed government is corrupt, that the big boys locked in windowless Washington think-tanks are up to some nasty business. But to any political thinker — and Change's *thinking* was certainly political — power and corruption are synonyms.

Her politics were axiomatic; and thus those who discount Change as a misguided radical fail to see her bigger vision. She had no single cause other than to alert Penn's students to the great goodness of living, to teach us to love again, which is to live life to the fullest. Change amplified our sense of what it means to be human.

Her intention was to ask questions, not to answer them. This meant being seen, being heard, indeed, being felt at all costs. Unhappily for Change, Penn might not have been prepared to answer her difficult issues. She felt ignored and alienated, but worst of all, accepted as something normal and everyday. Change witnessed the waning of her powers to shock; and, alas, found unfortunate ways of compensation.

In a sense, she sacrificed to a dif-

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fuse set of ideas: she made the ultimate protest so that we the students might go on protesting. She presented Penn with the most unlikely gift, and the implicit, impossible challenge of a sort of reciprocity. Change's suicide suggested mass complicity; it pointed a condemning finger in all directions. Many considered this disquieting, to say the least. Some saw it as offensive, even obscene. Hence the eerie silence in the immediate wake of her death.

Change's suicide, for me, was the major event at this University last year. It exposed a volatile undercurrent beneath the staid veneer of our time and place, the passions seething at the heart of our culture. It suggested that we in America approaching the millennium have convinced ourselves that politics can

be correct or incorrect, that euphemism can in fact cure the ills of a society.

But the next century might not be a utopia cloyed with information; things, in fact, might get worse. Unhappily, even the most audacious spirits might quail before the tasks of the times; if Change couldn't bear the burden, then optimism is condemned to fizzle out, like a damp firecracker wick. This, for me, was the semantics of suicide.

On the other hand, life and death and their manipulation is an intensely personal affair. Perhaps Change's suicide had no relation to her vision of protest; perhaps there were issues that never entered her public persona... Do we even have the right to speculate?

But Change's suicide, and its disturbingly public character, imply a final appeal to her audience, a plea for interpretation. It cast a dismal shadow over her optimistic enterprise; but it did not negate or cancel her efforts in life by any means. More than our small songs of remembrance, more than marches or rallies, more even than her one uncharacteristic

act, Change will remain vivid in our memories for her boldness and her charisma.

We should be grateful she chose our University as the theater of her personal and private battles. Change brought a breath of youth to our aging campus, and consecrated her battleground better than any speech or poem possibly could. Students will little note and quickly forget the minutiae of the classroom, Hillary Clinton's speech or Jiang Zemin's visit to the city. But Change will live on, born posthumously in the minds and memories of people she touched.

Change lived a life of passion and spoke the truth to power with inimitable style. She offered an example not for emulation, but for inspiration. Those of us who knew her should never underestimate our great good fortune. Years hence, we will hold our accomplishments cheap while any speaks of the courageous spirit of Kathy Change.

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