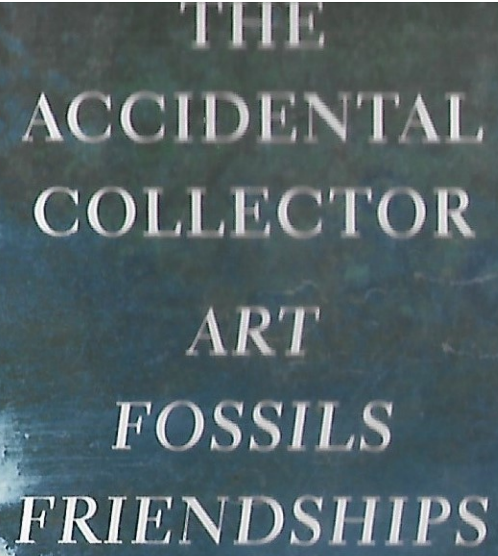


THE ACCIDENTAL COLLECTOR

ART FOSSILS FRIENDSHIPS

WESLEY WEHR

Susanne K. Langer: Philosopher of Art & Science

PHILOSOPHER SUSANNE K. LANGER WAS one of the first women in the United States to become a professional philosopher. To be accepted by a community of male philosophers during her early years was a formidable challenge. As she once explained to me: "To be taken seriously by other philosophers during my early years, I had to be at least twice as 'logical' as they were. After all, women were usually dismissed as being flighty, illogical creatures."

Langer was visiting professor of philosophy at the University of Washington during 1952 and 1953, and she revisited Seattle in 1966. During her time in Seattle she met, and in some instances became good friends with, a number of painters and musicians—notably, painters Guy Anderson, Mark Tobey and Morris Graves, poets Elizabeth Bishop and Richard Selig, and musician Eva Heinitz.

Langer's well-known book *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art,* a highly popular and very readable introduction to her philosophy of art, was first published in 1942. It is still read and admired by scholars, artists, and a wide public, as are several other

books of hers. In sharp contrast to the popularity of some of her books, Langer was a very private person, one who disliked excessive public attention. Her friendships, her daily life, and her conversations were private matters.

She would have strongly disapproved of the memoir that follows. When she read some of my published conversations with Mark Tobey, she warned me that I was wasting my time recording and writing accounts of my friendships with various artists, writers, and musicians I had known: "You should be concentrating on your serious work, your painting and paleontology. If you spend your time writing memoirs you will not develop intellectually," she said firmly.

Despite her dislike of memoirs, I began to take notes on my encounters with her. What follows is a brief account of her conversations with various Pacific Northwest painters, writers, and musicians during her visits to Seattle.

When I first met Susanne Langer she was nearly sixty years old and I was twenty-three. One of her students, Paul Mills, was also curator of art at the Henry Art Gallery on the University of Washington campus. Paul was so enthusiastic about Langer that I wanted to meet her myself. But I knew nothing about philosophy; my formal training was in music composition. At best, I had browsed through Will Durant's *Story of Philosophy*, a popular introduction to the field, and I had taken an introductory course taught by visiting aesthetician Morris Weitz.

I knocked on Langer's office door and introduced myself. I explained that I was a music student, and that I knew her cellist friend Eva Heinitz, and also Paul Mills. Trying to justify my unexpected visit to her, I added that I had taken a class from Weitz. We had a brief, quite pleasant

Philosopher Susanne K. Langer (second from right) with her father, Antonio Knauth (far right), her two sisters, Ursula and Ilse, and their riding groom, probably in Central Park, circa 1910. Shortly after this picture was taken sixteen-year-old Langer began her formal studies in philosophy, at a time when women were not considered eligible material for entering the male-dominated world of American professional philosophy. Photograph courtesy of Leonard Langer.

conversation. Langer had already invited Eva and Paul to her rustic cabin in the woods, a short drive north of Seattle. She rented it from music professor Theodore Norman. She suggested I might like to join Eva and Paul for an afternoon in the country with her.

When we arrived at Susanne's cabin she had already packed a picnic basket. We hiked to a nearby stream and had our lunch there. Susanne seemed to be in her natural element when she was in a forest. Nothing escaped her nature-loving attention. Whether it was an animal's tracks on the trail, or whirring insects in the bushes, or a bird flying past her in the sky, or even a croaking frog in the stream, she knew the names of nearly all of them. During that afternoon in the woods with her, I had my first glimpse of the newfound friend with whom I would comb beaches and collect fossils in years to come.

Wherever Susanne traveled, two things invariably accompanied her: her card catalog files and her cello. She always had to be within easy reach of her card files, which contained hundreds of her carefully notated file cards. These cards were filled with copious notes from her far-ranging reading in philosophy, biology, anthropology, art, and a long list of other such subjects, with her personal observations, and with remarks made to her by friends, remarks that stimulated her reflective imagination.

We began to meet regularly for lunch in the University District. Howard's restaurant served Danish meatballs with onion gravy. This was exactly the sort of food that Susanne liked. One time while we were there, poet Richard Selig came up to our table and joined us. He and I first met in Theodore Roethke's poetry workshop in 1950 and had become fast friends. I had just finished showing Susanne

a polished zeolite specimen from the Oregon coast. It was snow white, with shimmering halos of crystals like moonlight radiating out from its center. She had never before seen anything like it. She passed it to Richard.

"Wes is like Saint Francis. Beautiful stones come to him on the beach just as the birds came to Saint Francis!" she exclaimed.

I explained to Susanne that Richard and I studied poetry with Theodore Roethke, and that Richard was soon leaving for Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. Richard made a remark about poetry that delighted Susanne.

"That's very interesting! I may need to remember that!" Susanne exclaimed, taking a small brown manila folder out of her purse. It was filled with file cards. She recorded Richard's remark, and then read it back to him, wanting to assure herself that she had quoted him correctly. I often saw her write down a remark that particularly interested her. These duly recorded remarks, she explained, might eventually fit somewhere into her work.

Susanne Langer's other traveling companion was her cello. It could be cumbersome to travel with it in her station wagon, but she would not dream of traveling anywhere without it. After all, there was always the possibility that a few musician friends might be in the neighborhood, and there could be an evening of chamber music. Susanne liked to be prepared for such a possibility, even when it was remote.

While she was teaching here during 1952 and 1953, she studied cello privately with Eva Heinitz. When she was at home in Old Lyme, Connecticut, she enjoyed playing chamber music with her musician friends, "That is, if I can find anyone who is willing to play music with such a

weak sister! My cello teacher once told me, 'You are my best student, and my worst student! My best because you only have to be told once, and my worst because you even have to be told at all,'" she said.

At Paul Mills's suggestion, I had been reading Susanne's book, *Philosophy in a New Key.* Over coffee one afternoon, I exclaimed to her, "Susanne, you are a *great* philosopher!" She found my praise excessive: "It is very nice of you to say that, Wesley. Despite your generous claim for me, I am most certainly *not* a great philosopher! Aristotle and Plato are great philosophers! I *am*, however, working with a great idea. But it's not even my own idea. I swiped it from [Ernst] Cassirer!" she explained, setting the matter straight.

Then she said something that offended me: "Although a scholar most assuredly has to understand what he reads, it doesn't matter so much that an artist understands what he reads. The important thing for an artist is the excitement, being inspired by things. That's what leads to new work. Some very interesting paintings came out of a misunderstanding of Cezanne's statements about painting, works by some of the post-cubist painters, for example." I disliked the import of what she had just said, resenting her implication that painters are merely mindless oysters, producing lovely works of art when they are stimulated or irritated. But I said nothing at the time, feeling too anoyed for discussion.

While Langer was in Seattle she met painters Mark Tobey, Guy Anderson, and Morris Graves, and poets Elizabeth Bishop and Richard Selig. She was very interested in what creative people had to say about their first-hand experiences in practicing their respective arts. She believed that they can often have important artistic

insights, and that they can also have what she called "pre-scientific insights" into the nature of biological processes. She had reservations about artists reading her books: "Perhaps artists should not read my books. It can make them self-conscious and overly theoretical."

I objected to her saying this. After all, Seattle painter William Ivey was a serious admirer of Langer's writings on art. He could talk about them with intelligent familiarity. His paintings were assuredly never self-conscious or "theoretical."

Susanne had many far-ranging conversations with Guy Anderson, who recalled: "I saw her on a number of occasions. She lived out north of town, not too far from where I lived in Edmonds at the time. Sometimes I'd go over to her place, a little house out in the country near a brook, a very pretty little place, and have supper with her. Then she would come over to my place. I had a little outdoor fireplace. We'd sit there on summer nights and talk about various things. One evening I had the fire going and we were looking at the flame. She was saying how fascinating the fire was. Here it is! And then it isn't! Here's the flame! Then it isn't! Then she said, 'There's a possibility, you know, that the world will be destroyed by fire.'

'Yes, I know. I know that's very possible!'

'Well, how do you know?'

'I've been taking *The Bulletin of Atomic Science* from the University of Chicago.'

'Yes, then you know,' she answered."

I interviewed Guy Anderson for an archival project. He described a different conversation he had with her: "I had been reading *Philosophy in a New Key*. I read it twice. When I was reading it, I could understand what she was

saying. At least I thought that I was understanding what she was saying. Of course, I couldn't remember anything five minutes later. That's typical of my mind. This is when she explained that her book was never intended to appear in a paperback edition. She was surprised at how popular a book it became. I noticed what a remarkable memory she had. I remarked on this to her.

'My memory is like flypaper. Everything sticks to it. I don't have to try to remember things. I just remember them,' she answered.

'Being a philosopher, do you feel responsible for the state of the world? It seems to me that people like you who have so much information, that if you're going to reach people you simply have to arrive at complex things through simple terminology,' I remarked, asking her very pointedly, 'Are you interested in saving mankind?'

'Yes, I am,' she answered, adding that she had done a number of things in conjunction with the United Nations. Finally she said, 'But you know, when you asked for complex things to be reduced to simple terminology, this is the hardest thing in the world to do!'"

SUSANNE AND I HAD LUNCH on campus with painter Mark Tobey. I wondered what they would make of each other. As soon as we finished ordering our lunch, Tobey launched into a long monologue on art, science, and philosophy. As usual, he was strikingly articulate, but he soon became so caught up in his own eloquence that I had to remind myself that he had once wanted to be a preacher, and he had always liked center stage. He had even performed in a John Galsworthy play at the Cornish School when he taught there during the 1930s.

Susanne leaned forward, listening intently to his words. When he finished, she responded: "That was very interesting, Mr. Tobey. You made several points that particularly interested me." She proceeded to reconstruct from memory a good part of what he had just said. Tobey was visibly alarmed. He wasn't at all used to having a trained logician listen to him.

They began to talk about music. Tobey studied piano privately with his friend Berthe Poncy Jacobson. He complained to Susanne that being a painter, he sight-read piano music "visually," rather than "musically." The distinction puzzled her until he explained, "I have a terrible time counting notes and figuring out rhythms. I see the music page visually, just as I would look at a painting or drawing. If I see a few notes, and large ones, I react and play too slowly. If I see clusters of little black notes, like swarms of insects, my eyes get excited and I play much too fast!"

Susanne was fascinated by all of this. She was interested in how artists perceive things. Even though artists frequently use words vaguely and loosely, or speak a private dialect with each other, Langer was adept at grasping what they were trying to get at. But when it came to how her peers expressed themselves, she had no patience with imprecise language or quasi-mystical mumbo jumbo.

It was apparent that Tobey was quite impressed by Langer. He seemed even intimidated by her. This surprised me. It was rare for Tobey to be intimidated by anyone. When she left the room briefly to make a phone call, he exclaimed, "Ye Gods! What sort of food does she eat? High protein, obviously!"

In 1953, Susanne Langer gave a campus lecture entitled *Artistic Perception and Natural Light* at Savery Hall. Assuming that a talk with such a title would have something to do with painting, I invited Morris Graves to attend. The subject turned out to be far over our heads. Morris suffered through its entirety with stoic self-control. As Susanne methodically developed her philosophical points Morris glanced at me, a perplexed, even pained look on his face. After the lecture was over, I introduced them. Morris thanked Susanne and took off into the night, looking back at me, still puzzled by why I had invited him to such an esoteric talk.

During the summer of 1969, painter Joseph Goldberg and I visited Morris in Loleta, California. I mentioned to Morris that I wrote Susanne almost daily. He was dumbfounded.

"And just what do you write to Dr. Langer about that could possibly justify your writing her so often?" he wanted to know.

I mentioned my interests in paleontology, geology, and botany, and how I often wrote to Langer about such things.

"I see. You're on a 'head' trip these days!" Morris responded dryly.

NEAR TUKWILA, just south of Seattle, stands a fossil outcrop called Poverty Hill. Here one can collect thirty-million-year-old fossil shark teeth, corals, and cowry and cone shells. This outcrop contains fossil evidence of what was once a tropical lagoon. When I sometimes tried to describe for Seattle visitors this dramatic difference in our prehistoric environment, I occasionally took them to this fossil-bearing hill. As soon as any one of them found his own fossil shark's tooth or a bit of coral, he could visual-

ize for himself what a very different world had once been here.

I took Susanne to Poverty Hill one afternoon. We had our picnic lunch on a grassy ledge that overlooked the meandering Duwamish River below us and the Seattle skyline to the north of us. Susanne was enthralled by the fossil shells she found in the gray clay at Tukwila. She wrapped them carefully so she could take them home with her. As we were driving back to the University District, she said, "I was thinking earlier today that people can turn into fossils, and often do. They settle into always responding the same way to any given situation. They don't learn from their experiences. They just blindly react to them. They have fixed opinions that nothing can change. Worst of all, they even take pride in all of this predictability of theirs by calling it their 'identity.' Yes, now that I think about it, people themselves can become fossilized—just like the fossil shells we collected today!"

IT IS NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE for me to figure out now just when and how I began to evolve toward becoming a paleobotanist. It was hardly a conscious decision. Like much of the rest of my life, irresistible opportunities arose, or I met remarkable people, such as Susanne Langer, Mark Tobey, and Elizabeth Bishop, who encouraged me to follow the interests I had in fossils, minerals, crystals, and the world of natural history. My visits to the paleontology rooms of great museums—especially the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, and the Museum of Natural History in New York City—introduced me to a world of endlessly fascinating rare minerals, crystals, and fossils, and their extraordinary aesthetic beauty. My

embryonic painter's eye responded to them. I began to want to know about how they were formed, about the geologic times and environments in which they once lived, just as I now lived in my own time and place.

I think it was Susanne, with her insatiable interest in the scientific nature of things, combined with her naturalist's appreciation for the outdoors, who was the single most important personal influence in directing my life toward that of a paleontologist. Recognizing Langer's importance to both himself and me, renowned paleobotanist Jack Wolfe and I named a new genus of fossil plant for her in 1987: *Langeria magnifica* Wolfe & Wehr. Paleobotanist Ruth A. Stockey and her student, Diane Erwin, in turn named a new genus for Wolfe and me: *Wehrwolfea*. They weren't aware at the time that some forty years earlier I had interviewed the legendary portrayer of Count Dracula, Hungarian actor Bela Lugosi, in his dressing room at Seattle's Metropolitan Theater, where the Four Seasons Olympic Hotel now stands. Time has the oddest and most unpredictable ways of coming full circle in one's life.

SUSANNE LANGER WAS UNLIKE anyone I had ever met. I gradually developed a few general impressions of her. She spoke in a straightforward way, right to the point, and with no rhetorical flourishes. Her voice was soft and animated. Her speech was clear and precise. When she was annoyed or riled, she still spoke softly, but her words now had an edge. She would not so much lose her patience as let one know that she was on the verge of losing it. It was a warning signal not to be ignored or taken lightly. If she became angry it was usually for a reason I could antic-

ipate. For instance, she particularly disliked snobbery and pretentiousness of any kind.

Susanne turned out to be far more adventuresome than I would at first have anticipated. One Saturday morning the phone rang at the apartment I shared with painter Bob West. It was Susanne.

"Wesley, it is such a beautiful morning, and I do need to take a break from my work. Would you be free this afternoon for some beachcombing? I can pack a lunch for us and pick you up at your apartment. If you would like to do that and can spare the time."

When she arrived in her station wagon a few hours later, she was wearing casual Levi pants and a woolen shirt. She had prepared and brought along our picnic lunch and even a thermos of coffee. We headed for the beach at Golden Gardens, a short drive from the Ballard District of Seattle. I had told Susanne about the tidal pools there, and the large boulders of basalt in the beach bulkheads, ones that contained small pockets of radiating zeolite crystals. She wanted to see them for herself.

On a ledge above the beach are railway tracks. Next to them is a trail along which one can walk, admiring the snow-capped Olympic Mountains, some sixty miles to the west. Looming above the railway tracks are tall bluffs covered with Scotch broom and blackberry bushes.

We walked along the beach, stopping to inspect the marine life in the tidal pools. We climbed up a dirt bank to the trail above the beach, the one beside the railroad tracks. Walking there could be dangerous. You never knew when a train might unexpectedly come around the corner.

Susanne was standing on the trail next to the cliffs,

and I quite stupidly was walking along the railway tracks. I spotted a white stone between the railway ties. It was quartz, and it had a slight cast of pink. I picked it up and stepped off the railway tracks to show it to Susanne. Just as I handed it to her, a train came speeding past us, on its way north. It passed within a few feet of me. Susanne and I stood staring at each other, saying nothing. We decided we'd had enough of beachcombing for the day. It was time for dinner.

While we sat in a Chinese restaurant in the International District, drinking tea, waiting for our dinner to arrive, Susanne said, "Wesley, you were almost killed by that train today, you know."

"Yes, I know," I answered.

What I was really thinking to myself was, "Young people don't die. It's only very old people who die. I am only twenty-three."

Three years later, while I was visiting Susanne in Old Lyme, we sat having supper in her backyard patio. It was early evening. After a particularly warm summer afternoon the cool evening was refreshingly pleasant.

Susanne pointed at the patio where we sat.

"Look at the stonework next to you. You may recognize something."

The quartzite pebble from my nearly fatal episode at Golden Gardens was embedded in the patio cement.

"I asked the stone mason to put it there when he made this patio for me. I wanted to keep that stone as a reminder of how precarious our lives can be," she explained, looking unusually reflective.

She got up from her garden patio chair and walked into the house.

"Our dinner should be ready by now. I hope you like chicken. After dinner I'll bring out a bottle of our family wine to celebrate your being here. Perhaps we should toast that stone, too. After all, if it weren't for that stone, you wouldn't be here this evening."

After Susanne returned to Old Lyme, we kept in touch regularly. I sent her such gifts as moonstone and cloud agates from the Oregon coast, or fossil leaves from Chuckanut Drive, south of Bellingham. Sometimes I sent her opalized wood from the Ginkgo Petrified Forest at Vantage, near Ellensburg. In turn, she sent me gemlike quartz pebbles she'd collected on the beach at the mouth of the Connecticut River, or mineral specimens she bought in gift shops during her travels. Many of our letters to each other began with an acknowledgment of these gifts we sent each other.

Susanne and Guy Anderson also kept in touch. During the autumn of 1956, she wrote him, "Wes told me that you had moved into town. I wonder whether you have found a place where you can put up an umbrella and live in the yard, or plant a palm tree to keep your paintings dry! I found a frame-maker (a very good painter, too. You may have seen some of his things reproduced in *Art News* or in *Art*—Walt Killam), who still had some chestnut wood from our trees that died about 40 years ago, and he framed your *Sleeping Lioness* in wormy chestnut. You can imagine how fine it looks. Wes can tell you, he has seen it. With all good wishes, Susanne."

THE LAST YEARS of Susanne's life were primarily taken up with the writing of her magnum opus, *Mind: An*

Essay on Human Feeling. When this book was nominated for the National Book Award in 1965, Guy wrote her:

Dear Susanne,

A Spring greeting and congratulations as a nominee for the National Book Awards! I have just sent Robert Bly a card for same—the two of you being most admirable in every respect. Bly was out here for a reading, and I had the pleasure of knowing him a little. I saw Wes the other evening and we had pleasant words for you.

With warm regards, Guy Anderson

During June 1966 Susanne flew to Seattle and stayed for a few days at the Meany Hotel in the University District. Jean Russell and I picked her up at the airport. As Jean drove us back to Seattle, Langer mentioned that English art critic Sir Herbert Read had just reviewed the first volume of her *Mind*. She was incensed that Read had referred to her new book as "a metaphysical system." I should think that by now Sir Herbert would surely know the difference between a metaphysical system and a scientific line of inquiry!" she said sharply, even dismissively.

SUSANNE LANGER was not the only friend of mine who had been upset by Herbert Read. That same week, I encountered Mark Tobey sitting in Manning's coffee shop with a *Time* magazine article in front of him. He was incensed by something Read had written about him. Read's review described Tobey as a painter who did not paint "out of an inner necessity." I thought Tobey had taken these words out of context. They were intended to be an

ironic comment on the soul-searching manifestos of the New York Abstract Expressionists. I thought that Read's comment could be taken instead as a compliment to Tobey. I could not convince Tobey of this. As usual, he was already nursing a newly found grudge.

Susanne looked forward to seeing Eva Heinitz again. The three of us met for lunch at the Meany Hotel, and the two women conversed in their animated way:

"Eva, I'm so glad to see you! I had begun to wonder when we would *ever* meet up again. Between my philosophical work and all those daily chores that take up so much of one's time, I just don't have the chance to see my friends as much as I would want. And now that I'm finally here, do tell me, how are you? How is your teaching going? Do you have many students?

"I have some very good students to work with. But as you well know, there are never enough hours in the day," Eva answered.

"The cello lessons I had with you have been of great help to me. My nephew, Jim Dunbar, and I have been playing the Corette *Duo* [a little-known duet for cello and violin] which you sent me long ago. My regular chamber music group is a piano trio, and I'm hankering to play in a string quartet. But I cannot find fiddlers who will play with such a weak sister at the cello, and yet play seriously enough so that this old kitty will play with them."

In 1956, the Kaufmann Foundation awarded Susanne an ongoing stipend that allowed her to devote her time entirely to doing the research for writing her three-volume book, *Mind*. When Eva Heinitz asked Susanne how her work was going, Susanne answered: "Eva, I've been so very fortunate since I saw you last. My good friend Edgar

Kaufman Jr. has most generously provided me with a foundation grant that now allows me to concentrate solely on my writing. This all came about while Edgar and I sat having a picnic lunch on the stone ledge behind my house. I complained to him that I didn't see how I could ever finish writing *Mind*, what with the way my teaching duties at Connecticut College were cutting into my research and writing time. I told Edgar the situation was beginning to look quite hopeless. My grant from the Kaufman Foundation has given me the financial freedom to concentrate on my work. Edgar has my eternal gratitude. If there is anything he wants that I have, it is his!"

"Do musicians read your books about music?" Eva asked Susanne.

"Yes, they do. As a matter of fact, Hindemith told one of his classes that my philosophy of music was the only one which made any sense to him," Susanne answered. She was referring to German composer Paul Hindemith, who was then teaching at Cornell University. American composer Ned Rorem also singled out Langer's writing on music for being some of the most convincing and perceptive he had read.

Eva later confided to me, "I'm very fond of Susanne, but when she theorizes about music I can't make head or tail out of what she's talking about. But I'm a musician and she's a philosopher!" Neither Eva nor Susanne traveled much now. As I listened to them conversing, I realized that this might very well be the last time they would see each other.

In the evening, Susanne, Guy Anderson, Jean Russell, and I met for dinner at a local restaurant, The Bistro. This was a favorite restaurant for Mark Tobey, pianist Berthe

Poncy Jacobson, and just about everyone else in the Seattle arts scene. Matt and Siri Djos, who had previously owned a Swedish import shop in the University District, now ran The Bistro. Matt was locally famous for his Oysters Rockefeller and delicious Swedish pancakes smothered in freshly whipped cream and imported lingonberries. Siri, his wife, was equally noted for her lilting Swedish accent and charming hospitality when she served our meals.

The dinner conversation turned to the subject of teaching. Guy Anderson announced confidently: "I do believe that a teacher should be a great enchanter! He should make the subject interesting for his students."

Guy unknowingly had struck a nerve with Susanne. He had touched upon a pedagogical sore point of hers. The amiable banter of our dinner conversation came to an abrupt halt when Susanne replied sharply, "And I don't believe that for a moment! I assume that because students have signed up for my class they already have a serious interest in the subject. I refuse to spoonfeed them! I give them the work to do, and if they don't want to do it, that is *their* problem, and most certainly not mine!"

I quickly stepped into the conversation and tried to change the subject. I had been attending several physics lectures on campus, ones given by physicists Edward Teller and Hans Bethe. I mentioned that. We began instead to talk about the role of science in society and the dangers of a nuclear holocaust. Guy had just read a book about physicist Robert J. Oppenheimer. Had she ever met him, he asked Susanne. "Yes, I have. I once attended a meeting of physicists. They were in the midst of a heated debate. I could see that the issues were becoming more and more

muddled. Finally, I could not take any more of it. I stood up and tried to clarify matters. When I had finished, Robert Oppenheimer arose from his chair and said, 'Gentlemen, I have listened very carefully to what Dr. Langer has just said. I found her words to be lucid and noble!' He even sent me a letter shortly after that," she replied.

Susanne, the skilled logician, was often called upon to clarify philosophical issues when her colleagues got bogged down in some polemical impasse. Once she got the hang of what someone was saying to her, Susanne was usually several jumps ahead of him. As a logician she pretty well knew where the drift of his thought was inexorably carrying him. She often knew what someone was going to say even before he himself did. This was a price she paid for being a logician.

Jackson Matthews, a distinguished translator of French symbolist poetry and a Paul Valery scholar, taught at the University of Washington during the 1950s. He was now living on the East Coast. He came back to Seattle briefly around 1967 and stayed at the Wilsonian Hotel in the University District, where I went to visit him. I told him about my recent fossil-collecting expeditions with Susanne, and about the letter she had received from Oppenheimer.

"I find your friendship with Dr. Langer charming! I haven't met her myself, even though we were both on campus here at the same time. But I saw her at an aesthetics meeting in Portland once. That would have been in 1953. It was a situation very similar to the physicists' meeting you described to me. The discussion was out of hand and going nowhere. That is, until Dr. Langer stood up and calmly set everyone straight. She saw the problem and how to resolve it. She impressed me very much. Now she's your

fossil-collecting companion. Yes, I am quite charmed by the thought of that!" he said.

The 1960s were a time of social protest and demonstrations, particularly on university campuses. I tended to go about my business, painting landscapes and collecting fossils. But then it started to bother me that I was not personally involved in these increasingly urgent social, political, and environmental issues. I was like the proverbial ostrich with its head buried in the sand.

I mentioned my concerns to Susanne. We talked about what it meant to be "politically involved." She had firm ideas on the subject: "So many people who claim to be 'concerned' about what's happening in the world run around like chickens with their heads cut off. They make a lot of noise, but they don't accomplish much beyond letting everyone know how concerned and upset they are. They could be much more effective if they would just stop running around in circles and take the time to figure out exactly how they can do something *constructive*. It's a matter of looking at the overall problem and then determining if there is some aspect of it in which one *can* be effective. Otherwise, one is swamped by the situation and doesn't do anything of any use at all."

When Susanne and I were at Berkeley, the campus and its adjoining streets were crowded with dozens of students who were passing out pamphlets and having petitions signed as we made our way past them. "I'm receiving so many requests now to contribute to environmental groups, to different charities, besides the usual requests for autographs. I've begun to feel a little guilty lately, because I'm concentrating so much on only my own work," Susanne remarked.

"Tobey told me once that people will devour you alive if you let them have even half the chance," I replied.

"Yes, I surely know what he meant by that," she responded.

"I asked Giovanni Costigan, the historian, about this once."

"I know who he is. He wrote a good book about Freud. What did he say?"

"He told me pretty much what Saul Bellow said when he gave a talk on our campus. He said that there are people who are very much involved in public matters, and there are those who are not. Such people, Dr. Costigan explained to me, are important in different ways. As an example of an 'involved' artist, he described Verdi's role in the social and political issues of his time in Italy. For an 'uninvolved' artist, he gave as an example Heinrich Heine, who wrote great lyric poems. What it comes down to, Dr. Costigan explained to me, is a matter of individual temperament."

"I can certainly agree with that," Susanne responded.

DURING HER 1966 RETURN to Seattle, Susanne was in town for only three days. In recalling her visit I'm surprised to realize how many people she managed to see during that short visit. I arranged for her to have lunch with Elizabeth Bishop at Woerner's European restaurant on University Way. At first, Elizabeth was very nervous about meeting Susanne. She didn't know how to converse with such a legendary figure in a field about which she herself knew so very little, philosophy. These two women hit it off immediately. Among other things, they discussed their mutual experiences as teachers. Listening to them converse, it was obvious how much they respected each

other. They addressed each other with an almost solicitous decorum, like two remarkable women conversing formally but amiably in a story by some late nineteenth-century New England writer such as Sarah Orne Jewett or Mary Wilkes Freeman, or in a painting by Mary Cassatt.

Susanne was such a rigorously demanding teacher that only a few of the students who enrolled to study philosophy with her lasted very long. Elizabeth, who felt that she was incapable of teaching poetry, had four students in her 1966 poetry class—Sandra McPherson, Henry Carlile, Duane Niatum, and Michael O'Connor—who went on to establish fine reputations for themselves as both poets and teachers. Susanne had only a few students when she taught briefly here, the most notable of whom was Paul Mills, Henry Art Gallery curator, who later became director of the Oakland Art Museum. Among Langer's most distinguished former students at Connecticut College is writer Arthur Danto. (For a detailed account of Bishop as a teacher while she was in Seattle, see my earlier book, *The Eighth Lively Art: Conversations with Painters, Poets, Musicians, and the Wicked Witch.*)

When I was alone with Susanne we talked a lot about art. She explained to me that an artist does not so much express his own feelings but instead works with his "knowledge of human feeling." She asked how my painting was going, and what sort of thoughts did I have about it. We talked about the various kinds of reasons and motivations an artist might have for painting a picture.

"Artists shouldn't worry about their 'motivations' so much. No spark ever burned down a house. It's the fire that does that. The spark, like an initial motivation, is what

gets the fire started. An artist should work on his best ideas and sidestep all the polemics," she said, setting me straight again.

Japanese potter Shoji Hamada wrote: "When one is seated before the potter's wheel, it makes no difference whether the impulse comes from the inside or the outside." Hamada and Langer seemed to be saying pretty much the same thing.

I BEGAN TO EXHIBIT PAINTINGS in Seattle, and later in San Francisco and New York. I routinely sent my art reviews to Susanne. She considered these reviews to be mixed blessings:

"I've been reading the reviews you've sent me. I'm glad your local critics like your work. But when these critics start writing about an artist and his work, there's a real danger that reading such stuff can easily make one self-conscious. I would suggest that every time you have a painting exhibition, you head for a microscope, or for a telescope, or go to the zoo, or to the aquarium—anything that will make you aware of the vastness of the world. Head off on a camping trip with one of your friends. Or go agate collecting on the Oregon coast. Doing such things can get you away from thinking about yourself too much, or from becoming some sort of public personality. After all, it isn't society that does in an artist nearly so much as it is the artist's own pride." Her remarks to me about the dangers of having too much attention reminded me of what Morris Graves had said to me about himself in 1949.

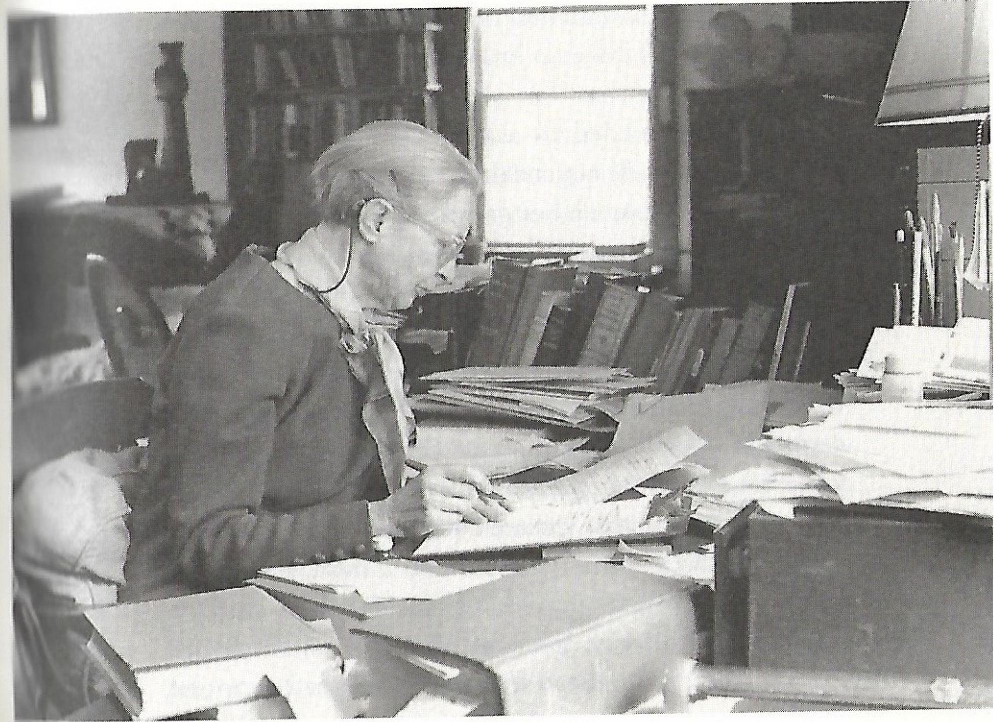
Susanne was upset by my tendency to be a miniaturist. I wrote short pieces for the piano. My poems were

invariably short lyrics. And now I was painting very small landscapes. She had still more advice to give me. Usually she was right, but it often wasn't the sort of advice I wanted to hear at that time: "I do hope you'll let loose some day and do some *large* works. Your small paintings don't offer you enough challenge. You avoid tackling the difficulties of doing larger and more complex paintings. There can be very small works that will have a monumental quality—some of Henry Moore's small bronzes, for instance. You really should keep in mind that when you work in a small scale you run the risk of making little paintings which are more like Chinese snuff bottles and overly precious little 'objets d'art' rather than real art. You would develop more as a painter if you would set yourself those challenges that come with working on large, complex works. If you continue to paint only small pictures, I don't believe you will grow as an artist."

Whenever a new book of Susanne's appeared in print, she sent me an inscribed copy. Shortly before she revisited Seattle in 1966, I received a copy of the first volume of *Mind*. I eventually donated these inscribed editions to the rare books collection at Stanford University's Green Library, along with several of Langer's especially important letters to me and the original manuscript of an unpublished essay of hers.

When I saw Susanne again in Seattle, she knew that I had been reading her new book. But she didn't ask me any questions about my comprehension of it. Why wasn't she quizzing me, directly or indirectly, I wondered.

"Susanne, I've been reading the copy of *Mind* you sent me a few months ago. You haven't been asking me any questions about how I've been faring in trying to make my



Susanne K. Langer at her work desk in her 1780's house in Old Lyme, Connecticut. Starting in 1956, I stayed with her here many times. On weekends, we would look for water-worn crystals on the beaches at the mouth of the nearby Connecticut River or collect ancient fossil shells near Langer's secluded cabin at Kingston, New York. Photograph courtesy of Leonard Langer.

way through it. So much of the material in it is very new to me, subjects I knew so little about: biology, neurology, and zoology.

"I haven't needed to ask you any such questions. Because I've already noticed that the questions you are asking me lately are much better questions than you used to ask me. My book appears be having an effect on you," she explained. She thought for a moment: "This reminds me of the time when Professor [Alfred] Whitehead was giving me an oral examination at Radcliffe College. When it was over, I remarked to him that it had seemed like a rather easy exam. 'But Susanne,' he said, 'I wasn't out to give you a bad time of it. I wanted to find out what you are learning, and I can tell that you are doing very well. Any bright student could shoot me down in an instant, if he knew where my weak points are. I don't let any of my students know where my weak points are.'"

"Professor Whitehead told me," Susanne continued, "that it is not a matter of how much you know. There were many things, he told me, which he didn't bother to memorize, because he knew where to look them up when he needed them. He said that the important thing is that what you do know becomes a part of your transformational processes."

I noticed that in private conversation Susanne could sound entirely sure of herself on some given matter. But in her published writing she could be very circumspect about that very same point. I asked her about this puzzling discrepancy.

"When you talk about animal values and behavior privately with me you seem quite confident that you're on

solid ground. But when you write about these things in your book, you will . . . "

Susanne broke in quickly, "Are you saying that I'm just mousing around?"

"Yes, you sure are! You're saying 'perhaps', 'maybe', and 'could be' in your book, while you are so much more emphatic about these very same points when we talk about them. Why?"

"But Wes," she countered, "I'm a professional philosopher. Even though I can be pretty sure of it, if I'm not yet able to prove a certain philosophical point, I have to be cautious in print. If I want to find out what a scientist is really thinking, I look in his footnotes. That's where scientists record their best hunches, the things they can't prove, even though they may be already quite convinced of them. In the formal text, one is necessarily cautious. But you can smuggle some of your most interesting ideas into your footnotes."

LANGER WAS BOTH A PHILOSOPHER and a naturalist. From the kitchen window of her farmhouse at Old Lyme, she could watch the deer feeding on apples that had fallen to the ground from a gnarled old tree in her backyard orchard. She studied the deer's habits. Did they feed together? Did they arrive at any set time? In her living room she had a terrarium in which she kept two crayfish, studying their life cycles. She called her pet snake "Esmeralda," because it was bright green, like an emerald. For a while she even had two flying squirrels in a small cardboard box in her living room. They were nestled in a shredded newspaper habitat she had prepared for them. In the evenings,

they would make their way out of the box, climb up the living room wall, and float slowly down to the floor, like hang-gliders.

Langer was studying animal behavior as part of her ongoing work on behavior, of both the human and animal kinds. Sometimes she was impatient with the articles written by animal psychologists: "When I'm studying animal behavior, I read journals by hunters and trappers. They're not all tied up in their pet theories, wanting the animals to conform to those theories. Hunters and trappers have to be keen observers of animals. Sometimes they notice and record things about animals that are quite fascinating—observations that give me new clues to animal behavioral patterns."

WANTING TO SEE WHERE and how I lived, Susanne and Guy once came to my room at Mrs. Thomas's rooming house in the University District, a room I shared with my cat, Fauve. It was filled with an eclectic clutter of books, paintings by artist friends, fossil leaves, petrified wood, polished agates, Northwest Coast Indian baskets, wax crayons, and a typically unmade bed. Dominating the room was a large painting by Guy Anderson, a study for his mural at the Seattle Opera House. It had been in his backyard in La Conner for some years. The rain had streaked its surface and even warped parts of it. I liked the way Nature had added a few finishing touches to it. Noticing how much I liked this weathered painting, Guy gave it to me. Jean Russell and I managed to strap it to the top of her station wagon and transport it to my room in the University District.

Susanne was admiring Guy's painting when I told her,

"Guy used to sketch with Tobey at our local zoo. Tobey did some very beautiful line drawings of the deer, and Guy did drawings of a lioness that Tobey told me were "as good as Delacroix!"

"I can certainly understand why Mr. Tobey liked your drawings so much, Guy," she said to him, explaining to me, "Guy gave me one of his sleeping lioness drawings. It's wonderful! It hangs in a place of honor in my house."

She looked carefully around my cluttered room, and exclaimed, "Everywhere I look in this room of yours there are such interesting things to look at! Obviously, an artist lives here. There's a real feeling of 'work in progress' here!"

When Guy had to leave, Susanne stayed on. There was a knock on the door. It was my friend Bob West. He appeared distraught. When I introduced them to each other, Bob apologized to Susanne for being so distracted: "I'm in the middle of going through a divorce. It's very upsetting and confusing!" he explained.

"Yes, indeed. I know what that can be like, having been through it myself. At first it tears you to pieces. Then you just want to get through it and be done with it! You just want to get on with your life!" she replied. She had been married to historian William Langer. Their divorce was a painful episode in her personal life. Susanne was silent for a moment, and then added. "I know all about attachments. I can at least say this: sometimes a bit of nonchalance can be of help."

SUSANNE COULD BE TERSE and blunt. She could also be generously tactful. Before Bob arrived, I mentioned to her that a young Seattle painter, Ralph Aeschliman, had accused me of being "a name-dropper." Apparently,

I had been talking too much about Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, and Theodore Roethke. It was true enough, my being a name-dropper, but it bothered me that Ralph would *say* it.

"It rather hurt my feelings!" I said to Susanne.

"I do know you pretty well. The different people you frequently talk about—Mark Tobey, Morris Graves and the others—are not interesting because they're famous. They're famous because they're interesting. You happen to like interesting people," she replied diplomatically.

There was an upright piano in Mrs. Thomas's living room. It was rarely used, and it was noticeably out of tune. I had just written a short piano piece entitled "End of Summer." It was a very simple piece, an evocation of the kind of sadness a child might feel when the autumn approaches and he realizes it's almost time to go back to school. I asked Susanne if I might play it for her. When I finished and looked up at her, I noticed that she was immersed in some private thoughts.

Then she broke the silence and said to me, "As you were playing your little piano piece for me, I began to recall a time very long ago, in a very similar setting. My family and I were sitting next to the piano, very much as you and I are now. Two members of my family had just finished playing some of the Brahms four-hand piano waltzes. My aunt, who was very old, sat in the chair next to me. She had been as quiet as a church mouse, so immobile during the music that I couldn't tell whether she had been listening or had dozed off. When the music finished, my aunt opened her eyes. 'I'll never forget the first time I heard that piece,' my aunt said. The rest of my family stopped conversing with each other immediately. 'There was a knock

on the front door,' my aunt continued. 'I answered the door. There was Herr Brahms. He seemed very agitated.'

'G'schamster Diener, Herr Brahms,' I said, amazed to see him at our very doorstep.

'Quick, girl! Is your mother at home?'

'No, I'm sorry, Herr Brahms. She's gone out for a while, and I don't know when she will return.' I replied. 'My mother was a pianist. Herr Brahms had heard her perform several times at musical gatherings.'

'Do you happen to play the piano?' he asked me.

'Yes, I do.'

'Good! Where is your piano? Please take me to it immediately, if you would be so kind.'

The next thing I knew, I was sitting at the piano next to Herr Brahms, sight-reading the manuscript of his piano waltzes, the very pieces you have been performing. He had just finished composing them, and he needed to try them out. Fortunately, I was fairly proficient at sight-reading. The ink on his music manuscript was still fresh."

Just then, there was a sharp knock on Mrs. Thomas's front door. Mesmerized by Susanne's story, I was still in a time warp when I answered it. I half-expected to find Johannes Brahms standing there, a music manuscript clutched in his hand, saying, "Quick, young man, do you happen to have a piano handy?"

It was Eddie, the skinny, red-haired newspaper delivery boy, wanting to see my landlady. "I'm here to collect for the paper. Is Mrs. Thomas here?" he asked. With that, I was back in the so-called real world again.

SUSANNE'S THREE DAYS in Seattle passed quickly. It was time now for her to return home. She was anxious

to get back to work on her book. I asked my parents if they would give her a ride to the airport. My mother had not met Susanne before, but she heartily encouraged my friendship with her. When they finally did meet, they hit it off very well.

As we drove from Seattle to the airport Susanne looked out the car window at all the cheaply constructed buildings lining both sides of the highway and sprawling across the nearby countryside. She complained to my mother about how uniform and uninteresting these mass-produced houses were. My mother in turn launched into a mildly sarcastic commentary on conformists. Susanne enjoyed what my mother had just said, but when she said something in response, my mother only half agreed with her.

Susanne was delighted by my mother's directness: "Mrs. Wehr, I'm so glad you don't agree with me! And I'm glad that you say so! I seem to scare people off. They don't take issue with me, or come back at me the way you just did. I do wish they would more often. If people don't respond to what I say, how can I ever find out what they're thinking?"

I SPENT PART OF THE SUMMER of 1967 in Port Townsend, a nineteenth-century town on the Strait of Juan de Fuca, a few hours travel west of Seattle. Its ornate Victorian mansions, so many of which are now converted into bed and breakfast inns, are vivid reminders of a thriving and opulent past, when Port Townsend was the major seaport north of San Francisco.

Actor Marjorie Nelson and her architect husband, Victor Steinbrueck, loaned me a key to their summer residence in the upper part of town. Built in 1888, this two-

storey Victorian house was a short walk from the downtown main street and waterfront.

I was the only one staying at the Steinbrueck's house. Late at night, the winds howled in the holly trees outside my upstairs bedroom window and tapped at the panes. The house creaked and groaned like a storm-tossed ship. Each night seemed like some relived childhood memory of Halloween. Each day I was stir-crazy and constantly at loose ends. I started to wonder if I would ever get used either to Port Townsend's Victorian ghosts or the casual pace of the people who now lived there.

When the tide was out, I collected shards of nineteenth-century pottery in the beach gravel along the town's waterfront. One day melted into the next. When it wasn't raining, I walked for miles and miles, out to the lighthouse at Fort Worden, then back into town again. When it was raining, I drank countless cups of coffee in the local cafes, sitting at their windows, staring out at the strait, the tide flats, and the islands beyond. Or I sat in a sheltered place, watching the tide come in and then go out again.

When the sun came out, I basked in secluded coves on the sandy beach that stretched for miles along the Strait of Juan de Fuca, all the way out to Neah Bay, Cape Flattery, and the Pacific Ocean. Or I read Meister Eckhart's *Sermons*. At times, Eckhart sounded subversive, especially when he wrote: "Art is an act of attention, not of will." Susanne Langer had been forever lecturing me on how important "the will" was—as in will power, self-determination, high resolve, and all those other self-directed, heroic enterprises.

But I was in one of those vaguely poetic moods out of which insipid poems are made. Without any resistance, I

melted into the summer's slow rhythms, marveling at the wonder of it all. I sprawled in the dune grasses, contemplating how exquisite a small leafhopper insect on a dew-laden blade of grass can be. I didn't smoke any pot. I didn't need to. I was on a Nature high.

I wrote Susanne daily, sending her dozens of letters and postcards, ones that contained far more adjectives than verbs. Caught up in the lethargic spell of that summer in Port Townsend, I began to neglect, and even worse, I began to forget all about William Butler Yeats' "monuments of unaging intellect," that battle cry of high achievers.

When I returned to Wilma Smith's boarding house on 18th Avenue NE, my phone rang. It was Susanne, phoning from Old Lyme. She was distressed: "Wesley, I've been quite worried about you. At one point, I was receiving a letter from you almost every day. They were all brimming with enthusiasm, until enthusiasm became just a kind of sensationalism. You've been drifting *up* the beaches, and you've been drifting *down* the beaches. I started to worry that you were going to drift down one of those beaches and never come back! It sounds to me like you are having your hippy summer. You are only doing what is in tune with you. Unless you have a challenge, your 'will' could disappear. This is what's wrong with the fringies, although you are not a fringie!"

As Susanne lit into me, I scrambled to jot down what she was saying. I finally had to excuse myself for a moment. I lied, telling her I had to go to the bathroom, and I would phone her right back. When I did, I had managed to straighten out some of my notes. Meanwhile, Susanne had obviously not run out of advice-giving steam: "Going along as you are now, I just don't think you'll develop any fur-

ther. Many painters developed when they went to Paris or New York. You could give the next decade of your life to being in the center of things. You could have a New York show of your paintings. You could even live in New York. You could always 'drop out' later," she told me, adding, "I feel time breathing down my neck. Like you, I'm in a state of inner excitement. But it's different to have it at my age. You're young now, but you won't be later. You won't always have the self-confidence and energy in competitive situations that you have now. The crowds will grow bigger and bigger. When you try to make your way through all those crowds, your elbows won't be as sharp as they used to be.

"You need to travel more than you do, and meet artists who stimulate you, and disagree with you in productive ways. Have lots of painting shows, because a time will come soon enough when you are just not up to it any more. You won't have the stamina you once had. Or you'll have other things to do with your life. Or you just can't be bothered. I do think it's time for you now to walk away from this idyllic summer of yours and jump into the center of things!"

I knew Susanne was right. I had already noticed that all the tranquility and the carefree feeling of those summer days in Port Townsend were making me very restless. In one of her Brazilian travel poems, Elizabeth Bishop has a line which began to haunt me:

"Have we room for one more folded sunset?"

I for one had had my fill of Port Townsend's "folded sunsets." Now I dreamed of traffic snarls, congested streets, and noisy, crowded restaurants. I missed the abrasive energy of a metropolitan city. Elizabeth's former student, poet Henry Carlile, had written a line about a great

blue heron that expressed my sentiments exactly: "Your silence makes me fidget."

As the old saying goes, words are merely words; it's actions that count. I phoned Francine Seders at her gallery in Seattle, and the Humboldt Gallery in San Francisco. We set dates for two painting exhibitions. During the next decade, I also had shows in New York, Basel, Bern, and Munich. In fact, I took Susanne's advice so much to heart that now she began to worry that I had gone overboard. My phone rang again:

"Wesley, this is Susanne. I've been reading your letters, and it seems to me that you are having a great many exhibitions now, perhaps *too* many. I think it may be time now for you to 'drop out' for a while. You might spend more time in the desert, or go back to the Oregon Coast again. Otherwise, all these painting shows of yours may become repetitious, and your work could readily become stale and mannered."

This was very typical of the sort of friendship I had with Susanne. No matter which course of action (or non-action) I took at any given time, she was quick to point out to me its possible pitfalls. She was not one to "take it easy," or to try to get through life in the easiest way possible. She thrived on intellectual challenges.

I tried to put down on paper some of my impressions of Susanne. One evening, I wrote, "With her highly disciplined, severely regimented work habits, Susanne was a master of so many aspects of her life. I did sometimes feel, however, that she never mastered the art of doing absolutely nothing."

I had barely written those words when I realized how wrong I was. It wasn't so much that the relentlessly hard

work to which she devoted her life had resulted in some of the major philosophical works of her time. There was more to it than that.

When Elizabeth Bishop taught poetry at the University of Washington in 1966, she told her students: "Don't think that being a poet is going to solve the great problems of your life. Those problems will still be with you. I can tell you, however, that when you are a poet, you may now and then have the satisfying feeling of just having put in a good day's work."

I began to remember the many summer evenings I had spent with Susanne at Old Lyme. I recalled one evening in particular. She had been at her desk all day. She was working on the second volume of her final book, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*. We had just finished having dinner together. I studied her as she sat drinking her coffee. I shall not forget the expression of infinite well-being I saw in her eyes that evening. It was the very pleased look of someone who had, indeed, just put in a good day's work. For Susanne, her deepest joy and renewal were in her work. She flourished in giving her life to what William Butler Yeats called "the fascination of that which is difficult."