

The Rev. Elinor Robinson Greene, II: *Through the Narrow Door*



By: Laura Palmer

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The window depicts Rev. Greene smiling while dressed in her deacon's vestments, seated in her wheelchair, with her voicebox on her lap. In the circle around that image is her full name, The Rev. Elinor Robinson Greene. The two smaller circles, below and to each side of the image of Rev. Greene, contain the initials of her parents: Elinor Robinson "Cookie"

Greene and George S. Greene, Jr. Below the circles, the scroll reads, "Be responsible to each other, the earth, and all sentient beings." Finally, the text surrounding the inside of the window frame, along the arch and the bottom around the whole of the image, reads, "My mission is to encourage, enlighten, and inspire, with humor and compassion, all whom I meet so they will know their value as children of God."

Window design, rendering (as seen on the cover), production, and installation by Willet Hauser Architectural Glass.

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Woman with partial sight and whole
vision in my little craft caught in a
storm, pitching and weaving on
Baptismal water holding fast to my
rudder, which
appears to
be God.

These words from the poem “I Am,” written by the Reverend Elinor Greene, known as Nellie, Nell, or Nells, serve as our introduction. For much of her life, 46 of 64 years, Nellie Greene was limited in her ability to speak, but never in her ability to communicate. As we dedicate this window to her memory and her legacy, we share this story of her life.

The Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields was the doorway into Nellie’s life in Christ for sixty-four years. She was carried through its doors to be baptized when she was ten months old in May, 1953, and was confirmed in 1967. Here she was supported for ordination, here she returned in retirement from her life in service, and here she was laid to rest. The journey was ordinary to begin with and no one could have known the extraordinary path her life would take.

Nellie lived a happy and engaged life with her parents, Cookie and George Greene, and her three sisters, Nancy, Alyn, and Lilah. She grew up in Roxborough and Chestnut Hill with blessings, opportunities, and privilege. Nellie lived with gusto. She brought exuberance to all she did. Ask anyone who knew her and you’ll hear about her wicked sense of humor, her irreverent and playful spirit, and her beauty with her blonde hair and dark brown eyes.

Sunny and optimistic by nature, she was a decent student if she put her mind to it, but she was a superb and passionate athlete; talented, competitive and strong. Nellie loved performing. “She had prominent roles in all the plays and musicals, like *Kiss Me Kate*,” her mother said. Her rich, contralto voice was strong and distinctive. Nellie loved life and life loved her right back. “She always had an entourage of admirers,” her sister, Lilah recalled. Nellie also always had something to say. Her father joked at the dinner table that he’d give her a nickel if she’d stop talking, but Nellie’s ebullient personality kept his nickels safe.

Nellie grew up in St. Martin’s and went all the way through Sunday School and confirmation class, but on her own terms. Her confirmation teacher told her mother she could be a handful. Nellie sang in the choir for years—her beautiful voice was appreciated, throwing spitballs in the choir stalls, less so. The music director, Harry Wilkinson, paid the boys in the choir a quarter every Sunday. “He didn’t really like the girls,” Cookie said. “He paid the boys so he could fire them if they misbehaved. But I made him pay the girls, too.” Nellie starred as the Angel Gabriel one year in St. Martin’s Christmas pageant, a fitting part for someone who always had something to say.

Nellie attended Springside School through her freshman year and then transferred to Chatham Hall, an Episcopal boarding school in the Virginia countryside where she started as a sophomore in 1967. It was there that she deepened a burgeoning love affair with China, studying Mandarin, and memorizing 1,000 Chinese characters before graduation. Nellie was on the Athletic Council and head of the Service Committee at Chatham. "She had great leadership skills, and was a talented, undaunted, and tenacious athlete," remembers her friend and classmate, Charlotte Caldwell.

"At Chatham, every evening was spent in contemplative reflections in St. Mary's Chapel," Caldwell recalled. "I think those chapel experiences and Nellie's role senior year as president of the Service League launched her in the direction of servant leadership through ministry." But Nellie's serious side never completely got the upper hand, Caldwell said, remembering how she was always ready to sneak around after lights were out to visit her friends.

After graduating from Chatham in 1970, Nellie planned to continue her Chinese studies at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. Hampshire appealed to her because she'd be able to take classes at the surrounding colleges, one of which, Smith College, had a strong program in Chinese. Nellie's interest in China was sparked in the 4th grade when she did a project on that country. Whatever captured her imagination as a child evolved and continued to sustain her as a young woman who dreamed of immersing herself in Chinese-American relations. She saw herself as a future emissary between the U.S. and the People's Republic of China.

Nellie was in love with life as summer came to an end. Her future was shining and she was eager to claim it. A summer highlight had been a debutante party in Southampton, near where her family spent many summer vacations. Just the day before leaving with her mother for college, Nellie was a bridesmaid in a wedding in Bedford, NY.

It was September 13, 1970. Cookie and Nellie were driving through Connecticut in the family's blue Ford station wagon on a golden Sunday afternoon when they were in a terrible accident near Danbury. Cookie remembers screaming "I can't steer the car, help!" as it spun out of control. Nellie wrote about what happened years later.

"Mum started to pull into the left lane to pass the car ahead of us, and changed her mind when she saw another car speeding up behind us. When she pulled back into her own lane, something happened to our car! Our car turned over three times, and I flew out the door as I wasn't wearing a seatbelt. Both of my lungs ruptured and my right arm and clavicle were severely broken...I bruised a kidney, was instantly blinded, and had a lot of internal bleeding, suffered two heart arrests on the operating table and this, along with other factors, resulted in my suffering severe and extensive brain damage."

Cookie was not badly injured, but Nellie's survival was tenuous. When her father got to the hospital a few hours later, the doctor told him, "I may lose her." A nightmare had become a reality. When Nellie was 4, her mother awoke in dread. She'd dreamed of a frightening accident in which Nellie was severely injured. Cookie woke her husband and told him. He hurried to Nellie's room and pulled his little girl into his arms. "Remember, Nellie, if you are ever in trouble, never, ever give up!" Nellie promised she wouldn't.

"It was a miracle she survived," her mother said. Nellie spent three months in the ICU at Danbury Hospital. She was still in intensive care when a photograph of herself at the debutante party she'd attended in the Hamptons appeared in *Vogue* magazine. Once stabilized, Nellie returned to Philadelphia and McGee Memorial Hospital for rehabilitation. For two years, Nellie fought through multiple surgeries and excruciating rehabilitation, but was able to come home on weekends when she was strong enough. The family's world was dismantled.

Her youngest sister, Lilah, who was 15 at the time, remembers those grueling months of rehabilitation in *Great Americans*, by Michael Vitez, which includes a chapter about Nellie.

"We were in a way, two lost souls making the best of a rotten situation. Nellie had been abandoned by all her glamorous friends who continued their perfect lives without her. I had been abandoned by my parents whose sole focus in life was Nellie's condition."

But something fierce began to emerge from the rubble of the life Nellie Greene expected to live: an unquenchable desire to do more than just survive. She would resurrect her dreams. A girl who loved nothing more than a good time became a woman warrior. Everything had been stolen from her, but she was going to get it back. Her mother and father were full on engaged in the effort.

Cookie and George Greene, together, formed a determined team. Pursuing every avenue of medical advice, every source of support, they worked tirelessly to support Nell. Constantly frustrated by the inability to alter the impact of the brain damage, they were not going to allow the mind and spirit within Nell to be defeated. Both George and Cookie were reluctant to call attention to themselves, but they worked with an unselfishness that knew no bounds in support of Nell and in support of each other. “Both my mother and my father, until his death in 2002, were wholly dedicated to ensuring that Nellie would live as normal and enjoyable a life as possible,” recalled Nellie’s sister, Nancy.

In February, 1973, two and a half years later than originally planned, Nellie began her freshman year at Hampshire College. It was a moment of triumph. In the early years after the accident, Nellie could walk with assistance—she was too proud to use a wheelchair—and while she remembered how to type, it was hard for her eyes to focus. She could see colors, but not letters and words. She could speak, haltingly, but not really well enough to be easily understood. Being unable to read or write would have been an insurmountable obstacle to most college students.

But Cookie Greene was as determined as her daughter. When she couldn’t find “books for the blind” to send her, she read Nellie’s textbooks and other required reading into a cassette recorder and mailed the tapes back to Nellie. Her mother completely dismisses the enormity of this effort. “Oh, I loved reading out loud,” she said.

Nellie typed her papers, but since she could barely see, her writing was a mess. She mailed the first draft to her mother who deciphered Nellie’s writing then recorded the paper on tape and mailed it back to Nellie for editing. After the revised version came back to Cookie, she retyped it and sent it to Nellie to hand in. This lasted for four years of college and several more of graduate school. Nellie’s indomitable spirit, motivation, and drive, were matched by her mother’s quiet heroism and ferocious love.

“Cookie is the most amazing person I have ever known, even superseding Nellie in some ways,” said Helen White, long-time parishioner of St. Martin’s and a close friend of Cookie’s. “She made Nellie possible 24/7, for all those years until we lost her.”

Nellie lived independently in a dorm at Hampshire College, but not without struggle. She would awaken before dawn because it took her 3-4 hours to shower, dress, and organize herself for classes. She once stumbled on an icy sidewalk on her way to the dining hall and when no one stopped to help, she crawled the rest of the way. Her independent spirit was continually challenged by her physically compromised body.

Nellie’s life as a woman with a disability began in an era—the early 1970s—when people often feared, shunned, and avoided those with differences. The marginalization and humiliation she endured is where the seeds of Nellie’s future ministry took root.

Years later, Nellie reflected on where she was spiritually during college, writing about herself in the third person.

Most of the time, she was simply too exhausted to give God much thought, and when she did pray, it was to beg God to get her through another day. In reflecting about this college experience, I realize that Jesus was with her every step of the way. Even when she didn’t feel his presence, he was there. He came to her in the person of wonderful professors who bent over backwards to help her achieve... many friends who read to her, studied with her, ate with her, and just plain laughed and had fun with her.

Nellie’s parents knew how much Nellie adored travel and they wanted her to continue to experience its joy. They traveled

with Nellie to London, Wales, California, Hawaii, and Italy. "We went all over London with her in her wheelchair and walker," Cookie recalls now with a smile. "I don't know how we did it." When they went to Tobago, Nellie's loving and strong father, George, carried her into the sea on his back so she could enjoy the Caribbean. In fact, whenever they were in a place that was not wheelchair accessible (which was nearly everywhere in those days), George would lift or carry Nellie.

With prodding from her mother, Nellie realized that despite her passion for China, a career in Chinese studies was unrealistic. Unbeknownst to Nellie, Cookie had already spoken with one of her professors at Hampshire and expressed her concerns about Nellie's major. Historical research papers, loaded with footnotes were exceedingly tough for her to craft. Her professor, who had similar concerns, told Cookie he thought Nellie should major in poetry. When Cookie conveyed this to Nellie, her immediate reaction was, "I hate poetry!" But two weeks later, Nellie said she was captivated by George Herbert, T. S. Eliot, and her favorite, Gerald Manley Hopkins. Soon thereafter, Nellie said poetry "made my life" and she made it her major.

Nellie's call to ministry began during a dark night of the soul, after spring break in her junior year.

I returned to college in near-despair and, during a sleepless night, received my call to pursue the ordained ministry. I can't really describe how it happened. All I know is that one minute, I was crying as if my heart would break, and in the next, my soul was completely at peace and the decision was made.

Against all odds, which was how she chose to live her life, Nellie applied to divinity school at Duke and Yale and was accepted at both. She decided on Yale, but felt she needed additional academic preparation and did a year of postgraduate work in philosophy and religion at the University of Illinois. Nellie started Yale Divinity School in 1980. Once again, her mother (with help from several friends), recorded all of Nellie's required reading onto tape cassettes, including *The Book of Common Prayer*.

While at Yale Divinity School, Nellie became friends with the legendary Catholic priest and theologian, Henri Nouwen, who taught pastoral theology and became one of Nellie's favorite professors. Although Nouwen initially had doubts about her pursuit of ordination, Nellie won him over and gained his support. In one of his most famous books, *The Wounded Healer*, Nouwen described a ministry that would mirror Nellie's own, one in which an individual's suffering and brokenness becomes the wellspring of ministry, rather than an obstacle to it.

Nellie described her long road to ordination in a sermon on "Faith."

My call to ordination took a great deal of faith to live into, and when I first received it, the Episcopal Church wasn't ordaining women. The whole process took 15 years to accomplish and I was sorely tempted to quit at many times during the journey. If I had not been convinced my call was legitimate, I never would have made it. Mother was embarrassed by it and urged me to stop many times. This was hard. She likened me to the blind woman who had to give up her dream of becoming a nurse. But once she believed me, she was a rock of support.

The little girl who could not stop talking became a woman determined to find her voice, no matter how hard or how long it took. Initially, she relied on a letter board, and then as technology evolved, Nellie had a laptop with an electronic voice, defying her traumatic brain injury to silence her.

Nellie knew that if she were ordained people would pay attention to her and her voice could still matter in this world. After graduating from Yale in 1982 with a Masters in Religious Art, Nellie returned to Philadelphia where she moved into a community of residents with physical disabilities.

Three weeks later, Nellie had a near disastrous nervous breakdown. She was hospitalized, stopped eating, and pleaded with her parents to help her die. The 4 year-old who promised her father she would never give up now felt she could no longer go on. She didn't care if she lived or died. Later Nellie wrote, "Life had lost its meaning and I felt trapped in a body

which I hated." She was fed with a feeding tube and remained in the hospital for several weeks. Cookie Greene felt Nellie's breakdown was triggered by fear of being out in the world in a way she had never been before and she became overwhelmed. This would not be the only time in Nellie's life when life's burdens were overwhelming, but Nellie's family and friends always rallied and, with love and care, she was restored in vitality and able to keep going.

After her hospital stay, she returned to her room in her parents home where she found solace in books. "I read and reread all the writings of St. Paul as well as Peter Brown's biography of St. Augustine." She listened to a recording of John Milton's epic poem, Paradise Lost. Nellie's life never made faith easy, but she never quit wrestling with it. As she once wrote:

Faith is like a muscle. You have to exercise it if you want to keep it strong. I struggle with my religious faith almost every day. When I pray, I often wonder if God is really listening or if I am just kidding myself.

In a continuing effort to exercise her faith muscles, Nellie also was invited to join and participate in a Presbyterian Bible study group. This group became a mainstay of her social life as she participated in it for more than 25 years thanks to the loyal dedication of her friend and co-member Sherry Olsen. Meanwhile Nell knew that though she was not willing and able to return to the community where she had experienced the breakdown, she also knew that she would need to pursue her own living space. She needed to be an independent adult.

Nellie was able to establish herself in her own apartment with help from Liberty Resources (formerly Resources for Living Independently). For many years, Nellie lived in her own apartment on McCallum Street in West Mt. Airy, assisted by aides from Liberty Resources who came twice a day every day to help her with her daily needs.

A final push to ordination came with unexpected visitors. "Out of the blue, two older women from my home parish, St. Martin's, came to see me and told me they thought I should be ordained," Nellie wrote. "They said they believed in me, and wanted to support me in any way they could." With their inspiration, and the support and encouragement of the Reverend Peyton Craighill of Philadelphia, Nellie completed three more years of pastoral and liturgical training at the Philadelphia School for the Diaconate.

The Reverend Elinor Robinson Greene, II was ordained to the diaconate on October 30th, 1993 by Bishop Allen Bartlett. The Reverend Hal Taussig, her former Biblical professor at the Philadelphia School for the Diaconate, preached her ordination service. He'd met Nellie on the first day of classes and saw her enormous potential for a ministry of inclusion. Rev. Taussig was impressed with her intellect, determination, and sense of humor.

When Nellie needed a Field Education placement as part of her diaconate training, Hal Taussig fought through the necessary bureaucratic hoops to make it possible for Nellie to do her Field Education at his church, Chestnut Hill United Methodist. Nellie served there for 23 years. "She was a roaring success in our congregation," Taussig said. Nellie was delighted to be working with Taussig. As she described in a sermon, "I love being an Episcopalian who is serving at a Methodist Church and deeply attached to a Presbyterian Bible study group. It feels rather 'Hampshire-esque'!" Taussig said that when he started at Chestnut Hill United Methodist, "There were maybe 7 members over 70." When Nellie came, a few years later, there were several more, but by the time she retired, the congregation she helped Taussig build had grown to over 125.

There are few outside Nellie's family who know Nellie as well as Hal Taussig. His commitment to her was unfailing and absolute. As he said:

"I did get to see her in action, work, and relationship more than perhaps anyone other than her mother and father...I suspect I may have taken more seriously than most anyone her own poetic portrait of herself as completely tortured, joyous, and engaged. Put more in her terms, I really believed her when she spoke of herself as 'a new unique, and crazily crafted mixture of body and mind...prisoner rudely captured...anxious rider on an unpredictable horse...athlete and dancer who moves with expert grace.'"

Nellie preached about five sermons a year, which does not sound like a lot without understanding that each sermon took Nellie six weeks to “write” as she slowly and painfully typed out words she could not see, one character at a time. Writing a paragraph could take her an hour, revisions and corrections, many hours more. Nellie carefully considered each painstaking change.

To “preach” her sermons, Nellie would recruit someone to “be her voice.” She would then rehearse carefully with her surrogate to be sure her message was delivered to her high standards. Helen Mirkil, a former classmate from boarding school, remembered what it was like to be practicing with Nellie as one of her sermon readers:

While reading a sermon to her I would invariably have to stop and clear my throat to keep my emotions from interrupting me. Nellie has an uncanny way of drawing from the depth of her human experience, yet with a delightful and childlike humor to reach truths we can all recognize in ourselves.

The Reverend Linda Noonan, who became a co-pastor with Taussig at Chestnut Hill United in 2001, remembers how rigorous Nellie could be. “Nellie was a demanding, exacting drill sergeant when it came to preparing people for sermon delivery,” Noonan recalls. “She was ambitious and independent in selecting her readers, her voices, and she gave them quite a workout.”

Helen White was another reader who remembers how grueling it was to practice with Nellie. “She was so sure about how the inflections of her words should be heard, she would rehearse and rehearse you. If she didn’t like an inflection you put on a word, you were stopped. She was very, very particular.”

When her surrogate preached from the pulpit, Nellie sat in her wheelchair beside the altar, hearing her words come alive. The congregation was spellbound, knowing the passion, dedication, and excruciating work it took to create each sermon. Nellie preached 110 sermons at Chestnut Hill United (which dropped “Methodist” from its name in 2008 when it became affiliated with the United Church of Christ.) As he recalled in his eulogy for Nellie, Taussig said, “When she sat in her wheelchair beside her reader on those 110 Sunday mornings, the sunshine often shone through the sermon to the church members, and occasionally, Nellie giggled at her own accomplishment.” The fact of her sermons, at times, became almost as important as the words she wrote. “When we work so hard to talk to each other and so intensely to listen, the exact content is less important than the relationship that keeps building,” Taussig notes.

Nellie had an exquisite pastoral presence. Life had forced her to listen and pay attention. She listened her way through college, divinity school, and diaconal training. Her ears had to hear what her eyes could not see. “It was pastoral care in slow motion,” Taussig recalls. “She was a patient listener, in part because it was hard to speak, and when she did, it was with her voice box. She was fully present and empathetic.”

“For my sister to say, ‘I’m sorry for you’ and really mean it, which she did, had a profound impact on people, because her suffering was so much greater,” Lilah said. It was as if Nellie had created an altar from her own suffering on which others could place their own.

Nellie’s ministry was one of presence. By being who she was and giving all she had to the life of her congregation at Chestnut Hill United, she was an inspiration. She was also a staggering witness to faith. She persisted in her love for God, despite the cost, the doubt, and the agony with which she lived.

“Nellie brought Job alive for me,” her sister Lilah said. “As someone born into white privilege, it can be hard to truly understand profound suffering. Nellie withstood incredible humiliations that we who are able-bodied can’t fathom...She was someone who had everything taken away from her, but managed to retain life-giving love.”

Taussig believes Nellie’s life and ministry have much to teach the rest of us. As he writes in his forthcoming book, *Encountering A Vulnerable Divinity*:

Within the framework of her life, one recognizes that life, though often painful and broken, is not generally tragic, and certainly not a failure. Many Americans consider major loss and trauma as tragic and failure. For us, the likes of major illness, economic crisis, divorce, or natural disaster often represent a definitive end to significant meaning. Nellie as a different kind of portrait of life is much more interesting. It is both less romantic and less fatalistic than the norms by which we make most of our choices. Working with the losses and hurt in our lives, along the lines of Nellie, simply assumes less perfection and more provisional possibilities. This reframing of the shape of our world suggests a broader, perhaps “divine”, perspective for us.

As part of her ministry of inclusion, Nellie developed an outreach program which she offered to other congregations with practical suggestions to make both church buildings more physically accessible to the handicapped, and congregations more welcoming and friendly. In describing her mission, Nellie wrote:

My ministry is to build a bridge of understanding between those who are able and those who are disabled. I want to help diminish any fear and alienation that marginalizes both.

Nellie wrote a delightful, and highly successful, program primarily to educate children about having a physical disability – “other-abled” she called it – and with her reader from her church, she gave it in schools and Sunday schools. Her sister read it with her in a school in California and a friend read it at a school outside of Boston. There was always good feedback. At the California school, attended by her nephews, Nellie’s program was transformative for the students whose classmates struggled with learning disabilities such as ADD and Tourette’s. “A profound inclusiveness resulted from Nell sharing her lesson,” Lilah observed.

A high point of Nellie’s ministry came on July 10, 2000, when Nellie used her electronic voice to read the Gospel before hundreds of delegates at the first daily Eucharist service for the General Convention of The Episcopal Church in Denver, Colorado. It was a powerful moment of inclusion from the church Nellie had always loved, but a church which seemed unsure of how to make a place for her.

“It was an extraordinary moment because it was the first time a ramp was ever used at General Convention to make it wheelchair accessible,” said Helen White who was there with Cookie and George Greene. “Nellie was part of the formal procession to the altar which was on a dais about ten feet high. She was right behind the Presiding Bishop in her wheelchair. Bob Tate, the rector of St. Martin’s was pushing her.”

When the time came, with the flip of a switch on her laptop, Nellie’s electronic voice filled the convention hall with Matthew’s Gospel. The Presiding Bishop at the time, The Right Reverend Frank Griswold, who knew Nellie and her family from serving as rector at St. Martin’s, remembers the moment:

She was dressed in her vestments as a deacon and read the Gospel through her laptop with the synthetic voice. It certainly was the first recognition in a formal way that engaged the whole Episcopal Church in being with the other-abled in an active part of the liturgy.

Later that day, the leader of the deacons in the Diocese of Colorado sought out Nellie, knelt beside her wheelchair, and placing his deacon’s cap upon her head, said, “Thank you for lifting our sights and stretching us. If you can do what you do, there is nothing the rest of us cannot do.”

Bishop Griswold said when he reflects back on Nellie, he remembers her expressiveness, “the flash of vitality, amusement, and naughtiness in her eyes and the sense of the incredibly lively person locked in a body that could not function in a way that allowed her the full release of what was within.” Griswold continues:

I think what really strikes me is that it would be so easy for someone who sustained those injuries to give up. I think Nellie’s courage is something amazing. People often aren’t comfortable with those who are severely handicapped and can’t talk clearly so they avoid them. Nellie’s own capacity to be

present, even if the means of being present as people understand them are severely compromised, is an amazing aspect of who she was. She radiated a vitality that was a contradiction to her own physical limitations.

When Nellie reflected on her experience at General Convention she wrote, "All I am doing is trying to be the best person I can be, playing with the cards dealt to me, and hoping with all my heart that there really is a God somewhere who cares about His/Her Creation and who knows my name."

While Nellie couldn't speak independently of her talking computer, she could roar. It was a primal howl that sometimes made Hal Taussig wonder if Nellie was in the midst of a disaster or whether something outrageously funny was happening. "She could roar with delight and roar with pain," he said. He often heard that roar of delight on Sundays when he drove Nellie home to her McCallum Street apartment after a long work day together. At the time Nellie could still walk with a walker. She loved to zoom across the parking lot, leaning hard into the walker to make it go faster. The first few times Taussig saw this he chased after her, afraid she'd crash and hurt herself, which made her laugh harder and push to go faster. "What a spectacular human being. Who would have ever thought that walking across the parking lot could be so joyous and meaningful?"

Nellie seized joy because it wasn't going to come to her any other way. One of the books her mother read to Nellie stayed with her over the years. It was Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankl, a neurologist and psychiatrist, survived three years in Nazi concentration camps. He believed that meaning-making is essential to human survival. Nellie described the impact of Frankl's book:

It made a big impression on me. One thing I learned is that all of us have the freedom to choose the attitude toward the circumstance in which we find ourselves. We can wallow in misery or make the best of it, and try to move on. I've chosen the latter. Here is where my faith has helped me. I believe that God is there with everyone, and eager to help us get through any ordeal. All we have to do is ask.

A remarkable window into Nellie's soul was her poem, "I Am." It was inspired by a reading of "The Thunder, Perfect Mind," an ancient Christian text from about 350 A.D., which expresses humility and brokenness as a source of the divine. Hal Taussig used it in small groups at church to inspire participants to write their own personal theological statements.

I AM

I am the current which flows between the body and mind
electric synapse which gaily leaps and bumps headlong into a
cell enthusiastic energy captured against her will.
A romantic, somewhat elegant and passionate butterfly
paralyzed in the Devil's Spider Web.
I am the tightrope walker, balancing
between two worlds:
I am the prisoner rudely captured--
the anxious rider on an unpredictable horse.
I am the athlete and
dancer who moves with
expert grace.
The speaker with soft, husky voice;
the corny contralto singer with deep love of music and song;
courageous and upon occasion funny, flexible, yet
incorrigible, I am the woman who laughs.

Woman with partial sight and whole
vision in my little craft, caught in a
storm pitching and weaving on
Baptismal water holding fast to my
little rudder which appears to be God.
I am a new, unique and crazily crafted
mixture of body and mind
of body and soul
I am the dark eyes and the smile...

Nellie retired from Chestnut Hill United in November, 2014. Her physical health had steadily deteriorated over the years. Her body had become much more rigid, her movements, limited. She knew it was time. The Reverend Linda Noonan preached at her retirement service which honored her 23 years of ministry at the church.

I pray that her ministry will not just have delighted us and inspired us, but caused us each, in some small or large way, to change. To change our understanding of what it may mean to be temporarily able-bodied. To change our understandings of welcome and access and hospitality. To see how God can work in each of us in radical, life-giving, unexpected ways.

Throughout her life, Nellie remained valiant and rarely complained. Her sister, Nancy, remembers asking Nellie once if she was in pain.

"Always," Nellie replied.

Nancy asked how she managed.

"I fake it," she said.

The totality of Nellie's suffering was sometimes easy to miss. Her physical disability and suffering were visibly apparent. But imagine smelling smoke in your apartment and knowing you could not flee on your own. Partially blind, it's impossible to even see if smoke is creeping under the door. This happened to Nellie when she was living on the 11th floor of Section 8 housing in Mt. Airy. She called her father and then waited, alone in her bed, smelling smoke, wondering if he would get there before the flames. When he did, George Greene carried her down 11 flights of stairs.

Once when Nellie was traveling with her parents in Florence, her father parked her wheelchair briefly at the top of a hill while he did something. Several boys came and started rocking her wheelchair. Nellie could hear, but not see them, and had no idea if they would topple her or shoot her down the hill.

But despite everything, "Nellie made other people happy," her sister Nancy said. She wrote poems for those she loved on their birthdays and a new beautiful grace every Thanksgiving. "Nellie was always giving, no matter what. She was full of love for everybody and had such devoted friends," Nancy said, remembering a friend who read War and Peace to Nellie in its entirety. "Even though I was unhappy that Nellie was disabled, she made it easier for us by being always so cheerful and grateful," Nancy said. "I can never complain. Nothing I have ever suffered rises to the level of what Nellie dealt with. I have had a lucky, happy life. Nellie was an inspiration to us all."

Nellie's sister, Alyn, said Nellie has influenced her life as a physician. "I felt we had a very special bond. Her sense of helplessness helped me deal with that with others in my practice and gave me a greater sense of empathy with my patients."

For many summers, Nellie's parents put her on a plane to Boston where her friend from boarding school, Charlotte Caldwell, welcomed her for a week. "Nellie's keen sense of humor, her attempts to spell out jokes, and her flirtatious, eyelid-batting never attenuated, especially after straw-imbibing her favorite White Russian."

Charlotte also fondly recalled how she and another Chatham classmate, Holly Davidson, “kidnapped” Nellie for her 50th birthday and spent a weekend with her in a suite at a fancy hotel in Philadelphia. Friends from Chatham and elsewhere showered her with flowers, gifts, champagne, tapes, cards, poems, and love.

In 2004, two years after her father died, Nellie moved into Bishop White Lodge near Cathedral Village where her mother lives. There she lived in a little room with her radio and talking computer where she wrote so many of her sermons and corresponded by email with friends. On Sundays she commuted to church using SEPTA’s Paratransit service. (She was one of Paratransit’s earliest regular customers.) When Paratransit couldn’t take her somewhere, Cookie usually did – or other friends pitched in to take her to the hospital to visit sick parishioners or to meetings of the Diaconate.

Throughout her life, Nellie’s physical abilities had continually deteriorated, but Cookie said, despite the increasing hardships, “Nellie still loved life and wanted to stay here.” In the end, it became impossible for her to swallow and the signals from her brain were no longer effective in telling her body what to do.

“I will never forget the pitiful expression on her face when the doctor told her she was going to die,” Cookie said. Two of Nellie’s sisters, Nancy and Lilah, were there that day with their mother, Cookie. On her board Nellie spelled out, ‘Ensure’. Lilah said quietly, “No, sorry, Nell, Ensure won’t save you.” All in the room were aware of the weight of those words. Nellie’s family, who had done everything possible to help her, now knew there was nothing more to be done, but help her say goodbye. Hearts that had been broken in ways beyond imagining were breaking yet again for Nellie. Over the course of the next two and a half weeks, friends and family came to be with her so that she was always surrounded by love.

Hal Taussig came to visit with Nellie as death was drawing close. He said she was trembling and crying and asked if she were afraid and Nellie said she was. As they spoke and prayed, he encouraged Nellie to feel God’s love receiving her. Gradually, she began to relax and seemed, “less tortured,” Taussig said.

Fifteen hours later, on August 5, 2016 the Reverend Elinor Greene died.

St. Martin-in-the-Fields, the church which had baptized her into her life with Christ, now bid her farewell. After her memorial service on August 27, 2016, she was carried through the doors of St. Martin’s for the last time as the Reverend Elinor Robinson Greene, II was born into her eternal life. At her memorial service, her empty wheelchair was left beside the front pew in the place where she had been with her mother for many an Evensong, a service she dearly loved.

“I have long believed that Nellie was a saint,” said her longtime friend, Julia Preston, a former correspondent for the New York Times, in her eulogy for Nellie. “I realize I have to be careful about using a big word like that when we are here in a church. But for me, this belief has been the way I could make sense of Nellie’s life. I thought of Nellie as a saint in the Christian tradition, someone who lived among us and was one of us, but who bore severe hardship in order to show us lessons of perseverance, faith, and grace.”

When Cookie Greene heard that Jarrett Kerbel, St. Martin’s current rector, thought of Nellie “as a saint who lived among us,” she immediately replied, “He’ll have to get over that one.” And when her sister, Lilah, told Nellie that a friend of hers suggested Nellie might be a Bodhisattva (someone who has achieved enlightenment but who chose to return to the suffering of this world to help others on their path to Buddhahood), Nellie snapped back, “The hell I did.” “No one is a saint in her own family,” Lilah said. “Before the accident, Nellie certainly wasn’t saintly. But she is one of my saints, one of my angels. I live with the blessings, benefit, and trauma of being Nellie’s sister every day.”

“Nellie was one of the great spiritual teachers of my life,” said Helen White. “She was so committed to the teachings of Jesus.” White continued:

When we work on the healing stories of the Bible that sound so amazing, we think, 'How can that be?' Nellie was healed but she was never cured. We learned the difference between being cured and being made whole in healing. Nellie, who lost nearly everything, was healed and made whole.

In reflecting on her sister's life for an Easter Vigil several years ago, Lilah realized that she had drawn the wrong conclusions about Nellie:

I have been wrong to judge Nell's life as a life of losses. I have been wrong to think that freedom for Nell meant to leave her rigid, spastic, and pain filled body. Nell has had a great life filled with love. She has not lived a normal life, with the normal husband, normal kids, and normal pursuit of wealth and happiness. She has lived a spectacular life. And I have been spectacularly blessed to share this life with her and to get to know the God that lives in her.

Lilah also commented, "Nell's 46 years were more powerful to me than the image of 12 hours on the cross, and as I said in my goodbye letter to her, 'who knew that such suffering could bring such love?' and yet, suffering that brings love is the foundation of our faith."

In the end, "saint" is only a noun. We make it a verb by giving it meaning in this world. Nellie's life is honored in a stained glass window over a doorway that brings people into St. Martin's and then sends them out again into the world. Nellie's legacy will only be enduring if we carry her "ministry of inclusion" into the world, making her mission our own.

Sometimes when Nellie would serve communion, her hand would become rigid around the bread and the recipient had to wrest it from her grasp. To take the body of Christ from the broken body of a woman who made a ministry of service and inclusion from her own wounds, reminds us all that there is no limit to what we can offer each other and the world, in the name of Jesus.

As Nellie reminds us, we have a choice.

The choice is to accept grace, love, and guidance and God's transformative power because of the work Jesus did here, or we can say no. It is a choice and it is a pilgrimage. I struggle with this a lot because sometimes my faith in God feels so weak as to be nonexistent. But, even when I know I am falling short, and the way ahead is not clear, I still do my best to go through the narrow door. I think that is the best any of us can do.

The following poem by Nellie's sister, Lilah, was read at her memorial service.

Sister of need--master of silent communication
Revealer of privilege--teacher of humility
Words fail--they have for decades
Words fly in your mind, but you swallow them
"Give you a nickel to be silent for 5 minutes"
How about 46 years.
Sister, participator--master of sports
Physical prowess gone--hey, but if it's physical, it's therapy
You have no idea how hard it is to get up each day
3,000 calories a day
Got yourself an exercise plan?

Try exercising for 46 years
Sister, taker--master of exploitation
Hey, sometimes that's the only way to get it done.
And it's not negative when it kills pain for the giver.
Doesn't feel right,
can't always say "Thank you"

Try saying Thank you for forty-six years
Sister, teacher-- master of sermon
Building bridges--what you've always wanted
Used to think it was culture, now know it is spiritual
Channeling through speakers
Letters left for forever

But try typing **only** for 46 years
Sister on a pedestal--master of the pose
You can teach the world by just being
Not only Lao Tsu. Thich Nhat Hanh
Mindfulness inside--exploding assumptions outside

Try posing for 46 years
Sister of laughter--master of joy
Easing the pain of others, soothing our wounds
Embracing your changes, accepting your losses
Flirting with life

and giving for 64 years
Sister of miracles--master of love
Still believing in the end
Job had it right
Suffering is relieved by faith
And faith brings everyone to Good/God.

Try believing for a lifetime.

Thank you, Nell!

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CHURCH OF ST. MARTIN-IN-THE-FIELDS