

## **“ABCD: EFGH”**

### **Fond Memories of Helga Thomas Keller**

by her devoted friend

Doug Hofstadter

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Almost all of us here knew Helga personally, some for a long time, and some for not so long. But no matter how little one knew her, one thing was clear as a bell: Helga was brimming with vim, vigor, verve, vitality, brio, spark, and sparkle. In many ways, Helga was bigger than life — so deeply involved in so many projects, and so caring about the lives of so many people.

Each of us knew Helga in our own fashion, and my particular connection to her started out with my being her “boss” and her being my “administrative assistant”, but that was quickly superseded by great mutual respect and ever-growing affection that lasted for well over 22 years. I will tell some of this story in a moment, but before doing so, I would like to make a small tribute to Helga’s unique style by listing a few random images that for me capture a bit of her spirit:

- beautiful scarves and sashes and brooches, flowery dresses and feminine hairdos;
- always serving meals and coffee and tea on elegant china;
- lovingly explaining a painting, scroll, or manuscript to a rapt group of listeners;
- walking several brisk tours of a mile-long loop at the crack of dawn;
- writing a myriad pen-and-ink letters and thank-you notes full of gracious old-fashioned phrases, always legible, even beautiful, despite a tremor in the hand;
- fearlessly sailing the wild seas of bureaucracy, all the while lamenting its craziness;
- always remembering special days and commemorating anniversaries;
- often flying halfway around the world to take loving care of an aging parent;
- someone who respected old-fashioned civility and courtesy, and who found it wrong for people to first-name total strangers, as if it were an act of friendliness;
- an old-world baker who never failed to bring scrumptious delights to meetings;
- going to lectures of all sorts in order to learn, learn, learn;
- the first person whom I ecstatically hugged, at 1 AM in a downtown café, when I learned that Barack Obama had been elected President of the United States;
- at the drop of a hat driving to Chicago and back in a day, just to make sure a visitor got to attend a show, see an exhibit, or take an architectural tour;
- a lifelong gardener who spontaneously brought a bouquet of flowers to welcome a new member of my group, sight unseen, just out of the goodness of her heart.

That’s the kind of person Helga was, and it’s terribly hard to believe that she is no more.

When I returned to IU from the University of Michigan in the fall of 1988, I needed someone to take care of administrative matters for my brand-new Center for Research on Concepts and Cognition (CRCC). I sent out an announcement of a job opening and got back many impressive responses, but one was head and shoulders above all the rest; that was Helga's. The words she wrote glowed with intelligence, sophistication, curiosity, and humor; to me it was crystal-clear she would be an ideal person for the job. And so the name "Helga Keller" instantly floated to the top of the list. After a phone conversation and a face-to-face meeting with her, I was convinced beyond a doubt, and Helga was hired on the spot.

From that day on, Helga was a fixture in my life and in the lives of all my family members and friends, as well as in the life of everyone who had to do with FARG (the Fluid Analogies Research Group). Helga enthusiastically became a FARGonaut (as we dubbed ourselves), and soon was essentially the ship's captain as far as administrative matters went. I was more the figurehead. "You took her under your wing!", said her husband Howard to me very recently. "And vice versa!" said I to Howard. Helga made all the major decisions, and I almost never dissented. So Helga ran the FARGonauts' ship, and a very tight ship it was.

She often joked about her German efficiency, and indeed it was visible in everything she did. She kept CRCC looking elegant, superbly maintained the "FARGbary", and took care of millions of things for all the graduate students and visiting scholars who were part of FARG, whether they were there for a week, a year, or ten years... She also kept meticulous records of correspondence, financial dealings, phone calls, addresses, and so on. Every person whose name she knew eventually became a genuine *individual* for her, even if she had never met the person face to face. Helga loved people and savored nothing more than serious human interactions.

On top of her regular duties, Helga closely monitored every aspect of the decrepit old building in which we were housed. Whenever she discovered, to her dismay, that the cellar was once again flooded or the roof was leaking for the umpteenth time, she would say to me, "I have to laugh, so that I won't cry..." And to her immense frustration, most of the time the IU Physical Plant would not come and fix anything, so she would take matters into her own hands, caulking windows and making other repairs herself. Over the years, her eagle eye and her common sense saved us from disaster several times. Thank God for Helga!

Helga was deeply involved in the lives of long-term FARGonauts and short-term visitors to CRCC, helping them out in ways that ranged from dealing with endless bureaucratic hassles to finding them housing and counseling them on all sorts of personal matters — serious health problems, crucial job decisions, romantic dilemmas, you name it. She was a pillar of support, a shoulder to cry on, and a close personal friend for all these people. Although Helga occasionally needed to let off some steam about some careless or forgetful act, especially when a FARGonaut hadn't obeyed some finicky IU rule about doctoral theses, she quickly forgot such peccadillos and would praise each person's special strengths and unique qualities, for she cared deeply for every member of my research group. She went out of her way to make them feel at home in Bloomington when they were very far away from their real home. And she did this not only for FARGonauts themselves, but also for their spouses and significant others and their children.

In recent years, my graduate students have all been male, and Helga took to affectionately calling her brood “the boys” (and then she would always chuckle at herself for using this maternal phrase). But chuckles or not, terms like “Helga’s brood” and “the boys” give a very accurate image, because Helga played the role of “mother hen” to all the FARGonauts down the years.

The outside world identified Helga so closely with her key role at CRCC that at times it became a burden for her. She was besieged by phone calls from eccentric individuals all over the world — her gentle term for them was “highly unusual callers” — whereas my term, less gentle, was “crackpots”. She reliably deflected these people from me, protecting me from their weird obsessions, never giving out my phone number — acting, in short, as a buffer between me and these off-base individuals, a service for which I was extremely grateful.

Sometimes, admittedly, Helga went a bit overboard in her zealousness for shielding me. For instance, in March of 1994, while I was on sabbatical in Trento, Italy, a letter came from Washington, D.C., containing an invitation to a dinner. Knowing well my reluctance to cross an ocean for only a day or two, Helga routinely turned this invitation down without asking me. In a long email to me, she casually buried this information in a paragraph of random chit-chat:

An express mailing is on the way to Jim; in it there are also some letters for you. You received a dinner invitation from the Clintons, and I sent your regrets; and there is some other mail — I’m sending Blagoja Janakov in Macedonia some articles he requested.

As I zipped through the paragraph, somehow her nonchalant allusion to “the Clintons” caught my eye, so I asked her what it was about. But Helga just replied with humorous quips:

It’s indeed a very personal invitation to Douglas Richard Hofstadter to join the Clintons for dinner on April 11 in honor of Thomas Jefferson. You’ll miss an intimate, small dinner with the Clintons, you’ll miss the chance of asking: “Hey, Bill, now that we’ve had a few glasses of your excellent Chardonnay, tell me the truth about what really happened down there in God’s great country of Arkansas near the blue waters of Whitewater. Did or didn’t you make or lose money? You know, I’d like, just friend-to-friend, to be assured that my support goes to someone who tells the God-honest truth...”

And yes, I called the White House with your turndown, and the social secretary and I both regretted very much that you would not make it... Ain’t it nice that we can once in a while really laugh about a not-so-silly invitation?

Although Helga was clearly having lots of fun with her little counterfactual fantasy, I was baffled by it, so I asked her to explain the situation straightforwardly, without any kidding. She instantaneously got serious and replied as follows:

Sorry, Doug — I didn’t mean to confuse you. Yes, there was a personal invitation to dinner at the White House on April 11, to honor Thomas Jefferson. The White House

wanted an answer ASAP, so I called the social secretary and told her that you are on sabbatical leave in Trento, Italy. But would you maybe consider flying back to Washington for just a weekend? — Ciao, Helga

Well, I was a bit panicky, so I asked her to please call the White House social secretary back very quickly and to reverse the turndown. She did so immediately, and a few days later I wound up crossing the Atlantic and, in the company of my sister Laura, who had flown from California, I attended the fancy Presidential dinner. We shook hands with Bill and Hillary but otherwise never said a word to them. Still, it was an unforgettable occasion.

That sabbatical year, 1993–1994, was tumultuous for me and my family. My wife Carol died very abruptly in December of 1993 in Italy, when our children, Danny and Monica, were very young. During that horrible month, Helga acted as a communications hub with many friends near and far. A few months later, while Danny, Monica, and I were still in Italy, Helga made careful, personal explorations of various schools in Bloomington for the kids — a pivotal action, as it led to excellent teachers and schools for both Danny and Monica when we returned home from Italy in the fall.

I preserved all the email that Helga and I exchanged that sad year; it would fill an entire book. I want to share with you just one other tiny sample of it, a note dated November 29, 1993:

Doug — I got up this morning at 2 AM to observe a beautiful eclipse of the moon. It was about 20° Fahrenheit, a clear sky, Orion quite close to the moon. At 11 PM, the moon was still its full size, shining in an intensive bright yellow, typical of cold winter nights, but by 2 AM, there was just a sliver of a sickle visible, and the rest of the moon shone in a dark grey color. I didn't wait for the full moon to be covered by the earth's shadow, but the sight I saw in this clear, cold, starry night was breathtaking indeed. — Ciao, Helga

A few months later, in the wake of Carol's tragic death, Helga sent me a number of touching poems on life, death, joy, and sadness. Here's a very small example — one stanza by the English poet Robert Bridges:

*Love can tell, and love alone,  
Whence the million stars were strewn,  
Why each atom knows its own,  
How, in spite of woe and death,  
Gay is life, and sweet is breath...*

When our diminished family returned from Italy that fall, Helga became deeply involved in the lives of both Danny and Monica, often driving them out to McCormick's Creek Park and other scenic venues for energetic hikes, and having long rambling conversations with them. Ever since, Helga has played a major role in my children's lives, nurturing them in countless ways.

After our return from Italy, I went much less often to my campus office, preferring to work at home, and Helga readily adapted to this “highly unusual” habit of mine. She would regularly bring to me at home all sorts of items to take care of, very often briskly crossing the campus on foot and then walking back to CRCC — a round trip of at least a couple of miles (but that was nothing for Helga, who was a demon for walking). Indeed, among my most cherished memories of Helga are of those times when she would unexpectedly turn up at my front door with a broad smile and a chuckle, looking so elegant and, to my eye, so *continental*. She had such flair, such a subtle sense of color, such impeccable taste. And in recent years she seemed to have grown more youthful. Whenever she arrived, I would welcome her into the house, and we would have a long chat ranging all over the map. These countless conversations in my hallway and my kitchen were lively, serious, and filled with laughs, and they deeply enriched both our lives.

Over the years, Helga became a real booster of mine, and she did so many major things for me personally that I couldn’t possibly list them all. Instead, I’ll just give four typical examples:

1. In 1997, Helga got the idea of organizing a show of my artworks on campus. She invited Betsy Stirratt, director of the School of Fine Arts Gallery, to visit CRCC, and when Betsy looked at my art and liked it, Helga’s little dream started to become reality. In the fall, the SoFA Gallery had a huge show of my art. This was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for me, and the whole thing was Helga’s brainchild; she made it happen.
2. Around that time, Helga helped accomplish a long-unfinished dream of my father’s, posthumously — namely, putting together a collection of all of his published papers — something he had dearly wanted to do but had been unable to complete, despite working on it for several years. Finally, with the aid of myself and my sister Laura, and also of her own daughter Christiane, Helga pulled the feat off, and the five thick volumes were beautifully printed and bound here in Bloomington, and then she sent them off to libraries around the world. This was my father’s dream, and Helga did it out of great respect for him. Indeed, she had gotten to know him well and had deep affection for both him and my mother. After my father died in 1990, Helga wrote expansive letters, always in longhand, to my mother out in California. This continued until my mother’s death in 2007, at which point Helga flew out to California to attend her memorial ceremony.
3. Helga helped bring about “A5”, the 60th birthday celebration for me in February 2005, which I hosted here in Bloomington — with some 150 guests and catered meals for everyone for three-and-a-half days. Helga found the ideal venue for this event, and she worked out millions of logistical details for my friends who came from all over the world.
4. Helga was deeply involved in collecting letters of support for various honors that IU gave to me, such as the Sonneborn Lectureship in 1997 and the Distinguished Professorship a few years ago. Without her intense work for these causes, these honors would never have come about.

Just imagine having such a great friend! After I'd known Helga for only a couple of years, I started saying the four letters "ABCD" to her all the time, standing for "Above and Beyond the Call of Duty". A few years later, when she'd outdone even her own exemplary self in helping me publish my book *Le Ton beau de Marot*, I added the four letters "EFGH", standing for "Excellent Friend, Grazie, Helga!", using the Italian word "grazie" ("thank you"), which she knew very well.

Looking back at how devoted Helga was to me and to all the people who passed through my research center, I see how truly proud she was of us and of our accomplishments. But Helga was proud of everyone she was close to, most notably her husband Howard, who, among other things, is a true polyglot, as well as a top-notch sailor and airplane pilot. But with all due respect to Howard, I suspect that Helga's pride reached its apex when it came to their daughter Christiane and her family. How well I remember the days when Christiane was in high school and college; Helga often boasted about her in the most sincere and touching fashion, and it was clear how proud Helga was of her. Her pride grew when Christiane became a teacher for underprivileged children in Chicago; and when Christiane married Brian, Helga was thrilled. But when Christiane and Brian had children, the focus of Helga's pride shifted.

It was obvious to anyone who knew Helga that in these past few years the apples of her eye had become her grandchildren, Nicholas and Alexandra. Nothing rivaled her love for those young blossoms, and the greatest dream of "Omi Helga" (Grandma Helga) was to nurture them both for many years to come — to impart to each of them some of her old-world culture and her profound love of art — visual, musical, literary, architectural, you name it. Nothing fired Helga up more than the thought of driving to Munster, Indiana and re-seeing her beloved grandchildren. Her eyes would light up as she described the complex thoughts and philosophical insights of her four-year-old grandson Nicholas. As her own mother was fading, Helga confided to me that she felt that these new, fresh lives, blossoming and sprouting before her eyes, were compensating for the loss of old ones. These two adorable "Schätzchen" had become the center of the universe for Helga, and I feel such pain as I contemplate the huge loss that Helga herself suffered when her life was suddenly truncated, and the huge loss that her grandchildren have suffered also, though of course not realizing its extent, since they are so young.

I also can't help thinking of the loss for my own children, Danny and Monica, now 22 and 19, who each had a special and close friendship with Helga. Helga imprinted on Monica a love for flowers and plants, a sense of flair and elegance in clothing, a way of going out of one's way to be thoughtful and kind. When Monica moved to New York two years ago, Helga wrote long handwritten letters to her once a month, just as she had done with my mother, and Monica cherished them. Helga was deeply impressed by Danny's love for photography and animals and was always interested in hearing about his classes and his Italian adventures. She encouraged both of them in all their dreams. For both Danny and Monica, the sudden, bewildering loss of Helga has been a truly harsh blow. But they absorbed much of what Helga gave them, so they will always carry a small piece of Helga's soul inside them. That for me is a small consolation.

Helga also had great affection for my wife Carol, and her dedication continued well beyond Carol's death: at least once a year Helga would make a quiet pilgrimage to Rose Hill Cemetery

to adorn Carol's gravestone with beautiful fresh flowers from her own garden. I would sometimes find those flowers when I made my own pilgrimages to Rose Hill.

Yes, Helga was someone you could always count on; Helga would never let you down. Indeed, as my Dad would have put it, "To help others make a success" was Helga's middle name. Helga Thomas Keller was reliability personified; she was a nurturer and a giver *par excellence*. She was also someone who welcomed all races, credos, ages, and lifestyles — loving diversity above all, delighting in the world's wild and rich heterogeneity.

And yet, in the end, Helga still was of German origin, and in some ways she relished that fact about herself. To coin a phrase, "You can take the Fräulein out of Deutschland, but you can't take Deutschland out of the Fräulein!" Despite Helga's frequent self-deprecating remarks about her "very heavy German accent", I actually found it quite mild, and I enjoyed the way she threw in an occasional "Doch!" or "Na ja...". I was extremely impressed by her use of English and American idioms ("I had to read them the riot act", she would often say, with a chuckle, about the latest crop of FARGonauts). Only a few weeks ago, she thanked me profusely for not having corrected her "many errors" in English over the years, but I replied that in all honesty, there were hardly any to correct. But though her English was superlative, nothing could alter the fact that it was in German that Helga had her deepest and most intimate feelings for words, for after all, it was her mother tongue. The German language was in her blood, and she deeply loved German poetry.

More than once Helga quoted to me, by heart, some lyrical lines by Goethe, and when this memory came back to me, I felt it was a cue. I went to my study and pulled down my books of German poetry to seek a poem that would reflect not only Helga's spirit but also our sense of sadness at this unexpected, sudden end of her life, an event that has rocked us all profoundly. After all, those of us who are here, and many other people who loved Helga but who could not be here, feel that death came far too early to Helga. We all feel this terrible event was so unfair, that her presence was "untimely ripped" from us all — but no matter how anguished our inner voices are, they cannot undo the sad fact, and we are all going to have to make our peace with this bitter event, each of us in our own way and in our own time. I, for one, have had a hard time recovering a sense of stability and serenity in the wake of this event, but in one poem I came across — a poem by Goethe himself, whom Helga so loved — I found great beauty, and that beauty afforded me a tiny bit of solace, so perhaps this poem could mark a small beginning, at least in my own process of healing.

It was obvious to me that I would have to use this poem in the memorial ceremony, but aside from reading it aloud in German, I knew Helga would have expected me to translate it and to read it aloud in English; indeed, she would have *insisted*, gently but firmly, that I do so. I have therefore striven to do my very best for Helga — to "do her proud" — and I hope that my rendition does the original poem justice. And so it is with my English translation first, and then the poem in Goethe's original German, that I will conclude my memories of our dear Helga, of Helga of the Loving Hands, of Helga who lately graced our lives.

*I'll think of you, whenever sunlight's glimmer  
On ripples breaks;  
I'll think of you, whenever moonlight's shimmer  
Reflects from lakes.*

*I'll see your face when, over distant rivers,  
The mist takes flight,  
Or when, upon a bridge, a wanderer quivers  
In deepest night.*

*I'll hear your voice, when harking to the surging  
Of waves that rush;  
In peaceful groves, I'll hear your voice emerging  
From in the hush.*

*You may be far, but still I am attendant;  
I hold you near!  
The sun has set, the stars are now ascendant.  
Were you but here!*

*Ich denke dein, wenn mir der Sonne Schimmer  
Vom Meere strahlt;  
Ich denke dein, wenn sich des Mondes Flimmer  
In Quellen malt.*

*Ich sehe dich, wenn auf dem fernen Wege  
Der Staub sich hebt;  
In tiefer Nacht, wenn auf dem schmalen Stege  
Der Wandrer bebt.*

*Ich höre dich, wenn dort mit dumpfem Rauschen  
Die Welle steigt;  
Im stillen Haine geh ich oft zu lauschen,  
Wenn alles schweigt.*

*Ich bin bei dir, du seist auch noch so ferne,  
Du bist mir nah!  
Die Sonne sinkt, bald leuchten mir die Sterne.  
O wärst du da!*

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