

A Work In Progress

History is nothing more than a vast collection of todays.

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Required Reading

It was with no small amount of confusion -- a mixture of sadness and curiosity -- that I opened the paper this morning to find a photo and an article about a college classmate and her unfinished list of life goals.

BY DAN BARRY
NEW YORK TIMES

For a long time, Ann Nelson's laptop computer remained dark.

It had been returned to her family in North Dakota, along with the other belongings she left behind in that great city 1,750 miles to the east. She was 30, lively, working near the very top of the World Trade Center, and -- you already know.

In the small town of Stanley, halfway between Minot and Williston, a fog thick enough to blur time's passing enveloped the Nelson home. Amid the many tributes to Ann, amid the grieving and the absence, it became hard to remember just when and how the laptop wound up in the basement of the one-story bank that the family owned.

There the laptop sat for years, tucked in a case as black as the Deutsche Bank shroud. It was a Dell Inspiron 8000, bought shortly before Ann called home that day in early 2001 to say she had gotten a job as a bond trader with Cantor Fitzgerald -- in New York! Soon she was living near the corner of Thompson and Spring, an easy walk from her office 104 stories in the air.

Ann's parents, Jenette and Gary Nelson, say the laptop remained unopened because they are not computer savvy. But it was more than that, Jenette Nelson says. "To tell you the truth, it was just too painful."

Three summers ago, during an art class she was teaching in that basement, a couple of students showed her how to use the computer. After the class, she says, "I just left it there."

Who knows why never becomes someday, and someday becomes today. One day last fall -- "when I got to feeling stronger," she says -- Nelson finally opened her daughter's computer. She pushed its power button and started by looking at the photographs stored in its memory.

Soon Nelson was learning how to play the computer's games, including solitaire and hearts. These distractions both relaxed her and reminded

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her of the games she used to play with Ann. Somehow, this little black machine made Ann seem present, there beside her.

Getting lost in the computer became part of Jenette Nelson's after-work ritual, though she didn't bother to open a file that said "Top 100"; probably some music, she figured. Then, two months ago -- click.

What she found was a catalog of goals, humanly incomplete: a list that reflected a young woman's commitment to the serious, to the frivolous, to all of life. That night, the Nelsons sat down with the list, and were with their daughter again.

1. Be healthy/healthful. 2. Be a good friend. 3. Keep secrets. 4. Keep in touch with people I love and that love me. 5. Make a quilt.

Jenette Nelson used to sew all the time, until it simply became too hard to guide a needle properly with a joyous little girl frolicking in her lap. Then, when Ann grew older, mother and daughter decided to sew a tablecloth.

"I don't think we ever finished," she says, laughing. "She had to be doing 100 things at a time, and consequently, some of them didn't get finished."

As for this goal of making a quilt, she adds, "I'm sure that I would probably have been deeply involved in this process."

6. Nepal. 7. Buy a home in North Dakota. 8. Get a graduate degree. 9. Learn a foreign language. 10. Kilimanjaro. 11. Never be ashamed of who I am.

"Ann was in many environments where being a girl from North Dakota may not have been the most sophisticated label to wear," Nelson says, recalling that her daughter had traveled to China and to Peru, and had worked in the high-powered environments of Chicago and New York.

Even so, Ann always conveyed pride in who she was, who her parents were and where they came from -- though never in a boastful way. "It's an important point about her personality," her mother says.

12. Be a person to be proud of. 13. Always keep improving. 14. Read every day. 15. Be informed. 16. Knit a sweater. 17. Scuba-dive in the Barrier Reef. 18. Volunteer for a charity. 19. Learn to cook.

By her late 20s, Ann had actually become a fairly decent cook. Still, her mother laughs in recalling late-night calls, like the one that began: "Mom, what's drawn butter?"

20. Learn about art. 21. Get my CFA. 22. Grand Canyon. 23. Helicopter-ski with my dad.

Then Ann Nelson's list repeats a number.

23. Spend more time with my family. 24. Remember birthdays!!!!

Birthdays loomed large in Ann's life. She would celebrate her birthday not for a day, but for a week -- in part because her father's birthday came the very next day, in part because she was proud to have been born on Norwegian Constitution Day -- which is May 17.

"Ann would have been 35," says her father, who turns 65 today.

25. Appreciate money, but don't worship it. 26. Learn how to use a computer. 27. Visit the New York Public Library. 28. Maine. 29. Learn to write. 30. Walk -- exercise but also see the world firsthand. 31. Learn about other cultures. 32. Be a good listener. 33. Take time for friends. 34. Kayak. 35. Drink water. 36. Learn about wine.

Ann was supposed to attend a wine class on the evening of Sept. 11, in keeping with Nos. 13, 19, 31, 36 -- the whole list, really.

After 36, there is a 37, but it is blank.

Her father reads the list as an inventory of his daughter's values. "You don't see any Corvettes in the garage or any of those material things you might expect from someone that age," he says. "She recognized that you appreciate a few things and kind of live your life wisely."

Her mother interprets the list as another way in which Ann seems to communicate with her when she is most in need. So, just about every day in a small North Dakota town, halfway between Minot and Williston, the screen of a laptop computer goes from darkness to light.

- Star Tribune (originally via [NYT Select](#))

Regardless of any minor personal connection I have with the story, it's still an effective tribute to a young woman who had her priorities very, very much in order. There's a lot more about Ann [here](#).

Update: Arah points out that the Star Trib link was broken, probably on purpose. I don't know how long this will remain locked behind the NYT Select wall, but I don't think that it should be. So, I've updated the excerpt to include the whole thing.

Posted on May 21, 2006 8:45 AM | [Permalink](#)

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COMMENTS (2)

[arah](#) wrote:

Hi Robert- any chance you have the full text of the Strib article? Your link is broken (this happens a lot with strib online, gah), and as I'm not a NYT Select subscriber, I can't read it. I'd really like to.

Posted on [May 23, 2006 4:36 PM](#)

[Tim](#) wrote:

Tears.

Posted on [September 13, 2006 10:55 PM](#)

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