

Thinking Green!

Essays on Environmentalism,
Feminism, and Nonviolence

PETRA K. KELLY

Foreword by Peter Matthiessen



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A Living Memorial

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Petra Kelly was one of the most remarkable members of the postwar generation, someone who determined at age thirteen that she would become either a nun in a Third World country or a new kind of politician. When she died, in October 1992 at age 44, international news agencies called her "perhaps the world's best known environmentalist" and "the personification of the German environmental and peace movements." She was not only the most widely known Green in the world, but the person through whom a transAtlantic synergy was brought full-circle. German Greens had been influenced in the sixties and seventies by observing the ecology, peace, feminist, and social justice movements in the United States. Petra then brought to America during the eighties charismatic testimony about the combination of those concerns in the new phenomenon called "Green politics."

Petra was uniquely positioned to play such a role, having spent her childhood in Bavaria and her adolescence in the United States, after her parents had divorced and her mother had married a U.S. Army colonel. While earning a degree from American University's School of International Service, Petra worked in Robert Kennedy's campaign and Hubert Humphrey's office and was influenced by the nonviolent civil disobedience of the civil

rights and antiwar movements. Returning to Europe, she worked as a policy analyst for the European Economic Community and then cofounded the West German Green Party in 1979. She was elected to the West German parliament in 1983, along with twenty-six other Greens, and remained in office until 1990.

Petra Kelly expressed the Green perspective to the international press with passionate concern and common-sense logic. Her performance on "Meet the Press" in 1983 was so impressive that a conservative, hawkish journalist who had grilled her during the program told her afterward that he wished she were on the other side.

Throughout her political life, Petra refused to regard politics as a cynical game of tactical maneuvering, power plays, and undercutting one's opponents. Instead, her method was simply to decry the violations of the human spirit and the entire Earth community that she saw, whether they were located in the ideology of the nuclearized nation-state, in various government policies, or in Machiavellian behavior. She maintained a spiritual sense of goodness and grace at the heart of life and never accepted a jaded view of the human condition. That is why she was literally astounded, thousands of times over, to learn of unfairness, duplicity, and cruelty. She felt that exposing such violations with righteous indignation and substantive documentation would surely mobilize opposition and make possible a healing correction.

In the early years of the West German Green Party, Petra was central in forging the links between peace issues, environmental concerns, and feminism. She coined the term "anti-party party" to express her sense of the new political mission: serving the grassroots movements *and* operating internally in ways that actually embody nonvio-

lence on all levels. That second principle has proven to be the more radical one, demanding a highly self-aware rejection of the competitive dominance modes of interaction that inform Western socialization. Instead, the West German Green Party played macho "hardball politics" internally and replicated many of the worst dynamics that had preceded them in alternative politics. Two fiery, warring factions, neither committed to the full meaning of nonviolence, dragged the party down into a self-destructive paralysis.

For Greens and other activists worldwide who are trying to develop political processes that avoid the toxicity so apparent in contemporary politics, the fact that the bodies of Petra and her companion, Gert Bastian, were not discovered in their Bonn apartment for nearly three weeks is a painful reminder of the extent to which she had been marginalized by her German colleagues and isolated in her last years. Like many other Greens, she had been pushed out of the party by dynamics of *realpolitik*. In Petra's case, resentment toward her media attention was a factor, though she had spread the Green message extremely well. Petra and Gert continued to work on behalf of eco-social causes, speaking out in their final years against the Chinese occupation of Tibet and also the rise of neo-Nazism in Germany. Petra was also drawn to eco-feminism and its support for the struggles of grassroots women.

In Petra Kelly the concern for eco-social justice in our generation seemed distilled to a unique intensity. It poured forth from her in myriad ways that will continue to engender new political possibilities.

How might we memorialize Petra in our own activism? I believe that the radically Green principles and ideals she

stood for will live on in the eco-social movements around the world. The aspect of her political legacy that does need attention and nurturing, and could benefit our movements immensely, is her focus on verbal nonviolence, an ethics of care, and sensitivity to the way people are treated in politics. The Green project will surely fail if we cannot live out the vision in our own circles. That has been the message of countless activist women, but it is still considered peripheral by far too many people.

My proposal for a living memorial is that we remember the tragic passing of Petra Kelly and the fact that she was deserted even in death for three weeks—and then think about any sincere activists or former activists in our movements, Green parties, organizations, and institutes who may have felt unappreciated, or unwelcome, or pushed aside. Seek them out and apologize on behalf of all of us. Ask them to give us another chance. Invite them back. Embody the vision.

For Women Who Dare

Postscript (eight months later):

In the weeks following Petra's death, a tension developed between those of her peers (mostly activists outside of Germany) who felt that the unanswered questions at the scene of the shooting certainly indicated the need for a thorough investigation and those of her peers (mostly in the German Green Party) who staunchly opposed any suggestion of such a need. To this day I do not understand the resistance.

During those initial weeks, the media noted that the German Greens were "strangely silent" about the deaths of Petra and Gert. This seemed to me a reasonable reaction, since they had treated her so badly over the years that a good deal of soul-searching was in order. Far from expressing appreciation for her tireless work as a co-founder of the party and her brilliant expositions of the Green vision to the German and international press, they had assigned watchdog committees to hound her, had done a great deal to marginalize her, and—after she and all the other Green parliamentarians lost their seats in the Bundestag in the 1990 election—had refused to give her a job or a grant from their foundation in order that she might have office support to continue her Green and human rights work via her extensive networks in both the industrialized countries and the Third World.

Speaking at her memorial service in Bonn on October 31, 1992, which was hosted by the Green Party, a man who had long been prominent in German Greens issued a rare acknowledgement that the party had not treated Petra well and had not understood what they had in her. It was a long-overdue *mea culpa* but certainly an understated one. A *mea maxima culpa* would have been more appropriate, considering that the speaker—an ambitious pol who had led one of the warring factions during the 1980s and subsequently maneuvered himself into the leadership of the party, and is thought by many to be headed for national office—had relentlessly denigrated Petra over the years, even at the height of her political success, with the standard left-Green put-down of being “politically naive” (read: from an activist background other than Marxist or anarchist).

In late 1992 I heard from various sources that a widespread attitude about Petra’s death among politically engaged Germans (not necessarily members of the Green Party) was the following: “Who cares how Petra Kelly died? She had outlived her usefulness. She was neurotic. She was so dependent on Gert that she would have been put into an institution long ago if it hadn’t been for him.” A German acquaintance explained this to me as an unremarkable response in a “callous culture.”

I was stunned. So—they absolutely would not forgive this woman her world-class success as an inspiring activist and her international media presence during the heyday of the German Green Party some eight or nine years earlier. Neurotic? She was an intense, intelligent, fast-talking woman who managed to function effectively under enormously stressful conditions—and to persevere. I would be hard-pressed to count all the famous male politicians in

history who were “neurotic” in their dependence on a spouse or lover to ease their exhaustion, soothe their exasperation, and heal their psychological wounds. That entire side of the male political career *is not even mentioned* in their biographies. It most certainly is not cited as a justification for heaping scorn upon the deceased activist or politician and dismissing the worth of his life’s work.

Petra in death demonstrated one last feminist insight, a painfully acquired realization: much less is accepted, overlooked, and forgiven in women who dare to have a public presence than in their male counterparts. The benefit of a doubt is not extended. Her missteps and shortcomings are perceived in exaggerated proportions. Her commitment and admirable traits count for little. She is not supported. She often fights in isolation. A collective sigh of relief may be discerned when she is contained, thwarted, or discarded and resigns “for personal reasons.” She is supposed to have known better than to trespass into a forbidden realm.

But you didn’t, Petra. All you knew—and wanted to know—was that the needless suffering of children and adults, of forests and rivers, of the entire Earth community could be stopped if you and countless others would speak out and dedicate yourselves to creating new possibilities. Your concentrated efforts on behalf of dozens of just causes were informed by a luminous orientation I can only call “pure heart”—although you would probably say you were energized by the Gandhian power of *satyagraha* (truth force) and nonviolence.

I have heard now that women around the world—and probably some men as well—cried and cried when you were killed. I did.

You were so loved, and you’ll not be forgotten.