

A Conversation about *Miriam's Words: The Personal Price of a Public Life*,  
with the editor, Mary Lou Judd Carpenter

1. Why did you decide to put this collection together?

I am aware that much of history has been written by men. So I was excited to find a woman's first person, real-time record and documentation of her life and of the historical events to which she was witness in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Miriam was a gifted writer, and reading her descriptions made history come alive for me, in a new, personal way. She also wrote out, often on scraps of paper, her feelings and struggles, apparently as she tried to make sense of things or to sort out her feelings and her thoughts. Combining those two sources – letters and private writing - provides us a most unusual window into the internal life of a gifted and resourceful woman. The facts of her experiences are amplified by her occasional private reflections and ruminations.

2. How did you know about the letters?

Like most children, I was completely oblivious to my mother's talents. I knew she wrote regular letters to her parents and other family members and friends, just as they communicated with her (starting before transcontinental phone service existed). In China, she wrote to share events of her life in the interior of China. When we lived in Washington, she felt responsible for sending reports of my Dad's responsibilities and her own activities. I really only discovered the quality and quantity of her writings when I was in my forties and realized that I wanted to know more about her earlier years and my childhood life. One day I asked questions about my life as a youngster in China, and she went to her files and brought out letters she'd written describing our fleeing from communist bandits – and our evacuation when the Japanese military were approaching our town. I was amazed as I had no memories of those times – I wasn't yet four years old.

3. Where were the letters?

Her husband carefully kept the ones she wrote him as they were frequently separated during the first ten years of their marriage. Her mother stacked the letters in manila folders according to years – and even suggested, in a note to her daughter, that she thought they might have value to historians. Miriam often used carbon paper to make copies for friends and family, when she thought the stories would be of particular interest to more people. When she was 38 and they moved to Washington, she began keeping a carbon copy for her own files. This was fortuitous for me!

4. Why did you publish the letters as-is rather than as a narrative or as historical fiction?

I am not a writer, but I can recognize vivid writing when I see it. Her own words were so strong, lively and compelling that I saw no need to restate or reframe her words. Why would I risk diminishing her poignant and powerful prose? The original words gave her observations and feelings a legitimacy and urgency that my rewording or fiction could not claim. However, because of space restraints, I had to edit out about 90% of her 2,000 letters, and the reader may find some transitions to be confusing. So I wrote an introduction to each chapter as well as the footnotes to help mitigate those challenges. I trust that that framework can help hurdle the gaps.

5. What is the relevance for today's audience?

There are two answers to that question. Many men may be surprised at the depth of Miriam's struggle between her love and devotion to her husband and her own desire to serve the public good. But her options became limited as a result of her husband's choices and "causes". I had no awareness of this internal angst which many "good women" have carried, until I stumbled upon scraps of private writings found scattered amidst her other records. And for today's woman, her model of honesty and fortitude in the face of such difficulties can be an example of integrity, courage and commitment.

6. How did she find the energy and resilience to cope with such strenuous experiences?

Miriam's was born in India where her parents were leaders in the YMCA. She inherited their deep faith and sense of Christian service. Both she and my Dad felt a "call to follow Jesus" by serving where the world's need was the greatest and the workers were the fewest. Dad felt that working in Congress in Washington partially met that criteria (he should be there now!). Her private writings are filled with biblical references and calls on God's goodness and faithfulness to sustain and strengthen her through the hard times. Eventually, she was able to make important contributions through her volunteer work, once the child-rearing years were over. Her deep convictions also aided her understanding during differences with Dad.

7. What are some of your favorite stories in the collection?

Life in China in 1934-1937, facing threats from communist armies and Japanese militarism. Struggles as a virtual single mother with three children less than five years old. Participation in activities of the U.S. delegation to the United Nations. Political and social experiences with Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Nixon and Kennedy. Growth and involvement of women in government/civic affairs in Washington in the 1950s and 60s.

8. How might your parents feel about their personal story becoming public?

My matter-of-fact Dad probably would not object but would regret Miriam's hard times. Although Miriam was an intensely private person, she also was a committed teacher and thinker. In the last years of life, she talked about marriage being a 25-year contract, after which people could renew the contract or go different ways if the circumstances of the marriage no longer worked well for both persons. Both my parents were committed to truthfulness, even in raw and painful circumstances. They were not afraid of reality, harsh as it might be. The fact that she kept all the letters and writings suggests she might have unconsciously hoped that other women might learn something useful from her life.

9. Will *Miriam's Words: The Personal Price of a Public Life* fulfill that possibility?

I hope so. Her example of energy, courage, good spirits, sacrifice and faithfulness may inspire people to lives of purpose and meaning. And women will be gratified to learn more of the progress towards increased options and freedoms as they chart their paths today.