

**FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON  
LESSONS OF LIFE FROM VIRGINIA KELLEY  
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**FINAL DRAFT**

We were utterly different. Like the characters in Star Trek, Virginia Kelley and I seemed to be from different planets.

The first time I met her was when Bill and I were students at Yale Law School and she came to New Haven for a visit. I had never seen somebody in real life who wore false eyelashes every day.

Here was a woman who got up at 4:30 every morning to put on her make-up, had a broad streak of white hair down the middle of her head, wore rings on every finger, and bracelets and bangles on each arm.

If she seemed foreign to me, I seemed equally foreign to her. I refused to wear make-up. And even worse, my usual garb was the law school uniform of that era: bell bottom blue jeans, boots or sandals, a work shirt or sweat shirt.

To describe our first meeting as culture shock is a gross understatement.

We were products of such different times, experiences, upbringings, and regional backgrounds. Neither of us could imagine that we had anything in common.

The most fortuitous thing for me was that her husband at the time, Jeff Dwire, was there too. He and I were also apparently different – he wore pastel leisure suits and had a well-coiffed, bouffant hairstyle – but neither of us cared what the other looked like. We just hit it off and had a great time.

In the months after that New Haven visit, Jeff would call me periodically and we would chat. He turned out to be my secret supporter, kind of a cheerleader for me. He would translate me to Virginia, and Virginia to me.

And, at least for awhile, Virginia tolerated me, in part because she assumed that I wouldn't be in the picture very long.

Then Bill invited me home to Hot Springs. It was a trip that I will never forget.

Bill picked me up at the airport in Little Rock, which is about an hour from

Hot Springs. Instead of driving directly to his house, he took me on an eight-hour tour of some of his favorite places in Arkansas. We looked at beautiful scenery. We went to a place that sold the best fried pies in the state. We went to a great barbecue place. In other words, we ate and sight-saw our way to Hot Springs.

We finally arrived, and my second meeting with Virginia turned out to be even chillier than the first. She could be civil to somebody who cut her own hair, wore thick glasses, no make-up, and bell bottom jeans. But having her son bring me home raised a whole new level of concern. Then she was worried.

To her, I was a girl from the North, a Yankee. And I talked funny.

Once again, Jeff Dwire was my biggest ally. After I left, he would call me and tell me not to worry. He would tell me that Virginia was going to come around.

While he was boosting me, he was also persuading Virginia that even though she and I looked totally different, we were actually considerably alike.

He was right. But it took a few years for Virginia and me to acknowledge and accept that we had a lot in common.

Years later, I learned from her autobiography, Leading With My Heart, that there was one moment when her view of me changed. As she relates in her book, she was driving from South Arkansas to Hot Springs and she was overcome with a feeling that she was not treating me right and was endangering her relationship with her son. At that moment she resolved to put her feelings aside.

She knew that many mothers are unhappy with the women their sons bring home, no matter who they are. So she wrote me a letter and poured out her feelings. After that we began to correspond and talk more. We spent more time together. And through sharing experiences, we were able to overcome what, in the end, turned out to be rather superficial differences.

As I got to know her and learn more about the hardships she had endured in her life, I respected her more and more. She was so strong. But more than that, she was an extraordinary example of resilience, persistence, and love.

And she relished having a good time. She loved to laugh. She loved to be around young people, especially her sons and their friends. She loved parties – the louder and livelier the better. I continually discovered wonderful personal characteristics in her.

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It turned out that many of the things I loved about Bill were things I loved about his mother.

When I first met Bill at Yale, I knew he was unusual. He would ask how your family was. If someone had lost their class notes, or had a family emergency, or gotten sick, he would stay up all night helping them study for an exam. He stood out from everyone else there because of his personal warmth toward people.

These were traits he inherited from Virginia, sort of genetic transmissions from her. The way he cared for people and put himself out for people. His ability to accept and tolerate those with different views and opinions. His optimistic, hopeful view of life, no matter the circumstances.

He is a glass-is-half-full person, just like his mother was. He sees the best in people and brings out the best in those around him. It's one reason he has such strong, loyal friends, and perhaps why he has strong enemies.

She was that way too. One of her greatest attributes was that she did not shy away from controversy. She would stick up for people who had been pushed around or oppressed. If somebody was mistreating a waitress, for example, she would march up to them and tell them it wasn't right.

For people who were less secure, or more negative about life, she was a challenge. A threat. And I think Bill has that same capacity to enrage people who are negative and who like to exert power by stepping on others.

Being around people like Bill and his mother was a real education for me. I learned that no matter what happens to you, you've got a choice. You can be embittered, beaten down, negative. You can drag yourself out of bed in the morning dreading the day. Or, facing the same circumstances, you can just keep going with an optimistic, resilient, hopeful attitude that allows you to enjoy each day no matter what happens to you.

That's what Virginia did. There was a buoyancy about her that never faded. And over the years I came to understand more how she chose to live her life.

I think she got her strength from her father. He adored her and she adored him. Although she had a difficult relationship with her mother, she grew up with a very loving father and a supportive extended family. And when she began to encounter adversity, she could tell herself she would get through it.

In some ways, she didn't have any choice but to struggle through the bad times. After Bill's father died, she was a young widow with a baby. She had to keep going. That's when she decided to become a nurse anesthetist, and she went back to

nursing school. It was heartbreaking to her to be away from her son, but she left him with her parents so that she could advance her training and get a better nursing job.

Then she married Roger Clinton, and he had a drinking problem. He was violent. It was a painful relationship for her, but divorce wasn't so easily accepted in the South – or anywhere – in those days. You were supposed to work through difficulties. You were supposed to grit your teeth and bear it.

Eventually the pain became so intolerable that she felt she had to divorce Roger Clinton. But when he fell apart and begged her to take him back, she felt so sorry for him that she remarried him.

I think it's easy for women today to say she should have left a man who was abusing her. But in the culture in which she grew up, the way you showed strength was to keep going and to keep the family together.

You put that make-up on, you went to work, you went to your children's events at school, you helped them with their homework, you made dinner. You showed the outside world that you were not going to be beaten down by life whatever your personal hardships might be.

She was also, by nature, a nurturer and a caretaker. She loved men and she loved the attention of men. And she thought men were by the natural order of things better suited to many roles in society. But she also realized that women have certain strengths that men don't necessarily recognize.

Later in her career she became somewhat politicized about the sexism she endured in the medical field. It started with a movement to require nurse anesthetists to work under doctors instead of as free-standing medical professionals. Most nurse anesthetists were women. Most anesthesiologists were men. And she began to realize that some of the problems she encountered were because she was a woman.

Feminism certainly wasn't a cause for her. But she began to see the world around her in new ways. And she acted on her observations by supporting me in what I did and being very proud of my professional and public activities.

She also encouraged Chelsea to pursue whatever interests she had and to excel at whatever she chose. Of course, she was a doting grandmother, just as grandmothers are supposed to be. Starting when Chelsea was a little girl, Virginia would take her to her house, or take her shopping or out to dinner. They would read stories together. They would go fishing. They spent a lot of time together.

Chelsea learned a lot from her, just as I did. She will always remember her grandmother with tremendous affection and love, and will treasure Virginia's

autobiography which was finished, despite a losing battle with cancer, as a last gift to a beloved granddaughter.

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Unlike many people, Virginia didn't try to control her fate. She went with the flow. And in the end, she was really able to live life -- and finish life -- on her own terms.

When her breast cancer spread and her chances of surviving diminished greatly, she had a choice as to whether to undergo certain experimental treatments that might have prolonged her life. But she had no desire to live longer if her life was going to be less fulfilling. In her view, being an invalid, or being incapacitated, or being in excruciating pain, was no way to live.

She opted against these treatments. And in the time remaining, her life was full of fun and joy. She traveled. She worked on her autobiography. She came to visit us often at the White House and at Camp David and spent her last Thanksgiving and Christmas with us. She went to Barbra Streisand's concert in Las Vegas at New Year's. Then, in January, she died in her sleep. And I'm sure she died in peace.

Fortunately for me, I have never been beaten, or had to cope with an alcoholic spouse, or struggle against the kind of sexism that permeated her life when she was coming up as a working woman. I will never face what she faced day after day and what millions of American women still face in their lives today.

But I also know that every one of us confronts challenges and obstacles of our own. At some point, every one of us has to cope with grief and tragedy, with disappointment and disillusionment, with smaller and larger injustices, with crises we cannot predict or control.

As I go through my life, I think about Virginia often. Whenever I start to feel sorry for myself, or feel wronged, or feel angry, I think about her. I think about my wonderful, resilient husband, who is remarkably like her. I think about the way my daughter bubbles over with love and joy, just as she did. And I think about the courageous, ebullient life she led and the example she left us.

Virginia's greatest legacy was to show that, even in the midst of personal trials and pain, you can and must keep going. Her lesson was that no matter how hard life gets, you get up in the morning, say a prayer, put a smile on your face, and go out and brave the world to do the best that you can -- with or without false eyelashes.