Jane Jacobs – Writer

By David Ebershoff

When she died last month at the age of eighty-nine, Jane Jacobs was writing a new book that, she hoped, would forever transform our understanding of economics. As her editor at Random House, I never had any doubt she would succeed. Jane, of course, was the author of the groundbreaking *Death and Life of Great American Cities.* With it, and her subsequent six books, she permanently changed the disciplines of urban planning, architecture, and city economics. Anyone who works in those fields today is indebted to her, even if they don't realize it. Long before her death she had become a legend. Certainly she was a legend when I first met her in 1999.

I flew up to Toronto from New York with Jane's longtime editor at Random House, Jason Epstein. Jason was a legend in his own right, having edited writers such as Norman Mailer, E.L. Doctorow, and Jane. But now in his early 70's he was retiring, more or less, and I was becoming Jane's new editor. We planned to meet for lunch at Canoe atop the TD Bank Tower. When Jane arrived at the restaurant a few minutes after us, I got my first glimpse of her fame. As she crossed the room many people recognized her. They turned in their chairs and whispered to their companions. There were many smiles and nearly all the restaurant, or so it seemed, was delighted to see Jane. One reason people knew who she was because Jane always looked like herself. There's a famous photo of Jane taken by Cervin Robinson in the late 1950's at the White Horse Tavern in Greenwich Village. In it she wears a silvery-white page boy and a pair of sturdy round glasses. She's smiling and listening to a

companion and appears simultaneously joyful and serious. And that's how she looked when she met Jason and me at our table.

Jane and I would go on to work together for the next seven years, through two books, and the early chapters of a third. One of the first things I learned about her was she didn't like people calling her a legend. "I don't want any disciples," she used to say. She liked people reading her books, grappling with her ideas, and, most especially, advancing them, but she never wanted reverence for reverence sake. Two years ago Vancouver decided to celebrate Jane by naming May 19 Jane Jacobs Day. She appreciated the honor but couldn't accept it. It was putting the emphasis in the wrong place, she said. When Vancouver recast the celebration as Jane Jacobs' Ideas Day, she gratefully accepted. Over the years a number of universities wanted to give her honorary degrees but she turned them down, disdaining what she called "credentialism." The press often described her as a public intellectual and a visionary. But that's not how she saw herself. When she sent me her manuscript pages in a FedEx packet, she typed out on the shipping label, "Jacobs, Jane – Writer."

Her ambition for her new book was large: "A new way of understanding macroeconomic behavior," she said in one of the many partial drafts I edited in 2004 and 2005. The book was called *Uncovering the Economy*. She referred to it as an Economics textbook. It wasn't (or wasn't going to be) a textbook in the standard sense. She was never part of the Economics establishment – the professors and technocrats at universities, think tanks, and government bodies who influence research, grants, tenure positions, and policy. She considered much of Economics "a bunch of phony-baloney." Even so, she was writing a book that she hoped would transform the discipline. "I realized I had something I much

wanted to say," she said. "A new hypothesis to present to fill the theory vacuum in Economics." It was a major undertaking, especially for a writer in her late eighties.

In January 2005 the Federal Reserve Board of New York invited her to be a keynote speaker at a conference on cities. She was skeptical of the invitation. "My first reaction ('blink') was to write declining," she wrote me. But then she thought it might be an opportunity to test some of the ideas from her new book, if even in an establishment setting: "To put forth a hypothesis for explaining why macro-economies even exist, and to account for major and orderly and regularized generalities, is a very daring thing to do – particularly when the audience is not prepared to hear it. To propose such a radical bifurcation as this may also put at risk my slowly rising reputation. I need to decide whether to be daring and take the risk, or to lie low. What do you think, David? I am about ¾ in favor of risk." She went on to say that if she made the trip to New York she wouldn't have time for anything else, "just in and out, whoosh."

She decided if she could rework the first chapter of *Uncovering the Economy* into a fifteen- or twenty-minute speech she would accept the invitation. In the meantime she received more information about the conference and the nature of the other presentations. She realized that much of what was to be discussed were ideas she had worked on a decade earlier or before. She sensed that they would have been just as happy to hear her discuss her old books as her new material. And so she declined. "I was so happy when I told this to [the conference organizer's] voicemail, and ever since, that I *know* it is the right decision." It never occurred to Jane to take the podium to present ideas she had already launched into the world.

But even during all this, her health was beginning to decline. There were short hospital stays. She was having trouble with her eyes. "Last week I was honorably

discharged from the rehabilitation hospital and am at home which feels normal and glorious. Yesterday I got my new bifocals which are going to take a lot of getting used to, but brains are wonderfully adaptive to making sense out of nonsense reported to them, and I'm counting on it." She remained cheerful, inquisitive, eager to return to her typewriter. In April of last year she sent me the first two parts of the book; there were to be nine. Her organizational model was Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. The day after her eighty-ninth birthday I wrote her an editorial memo, asking for some changes and clarifications. I closed the letter by writing, "Whenever you are ready, please send more."

But Jane never sent more. If I was a more practical person, I probably would have worried about her ability to finish. Back at the office one or two people asked respectfully how Jane was doing. I'd say Fine or She's amazing or I just spoke to her today! Looking back on it, this seems awfully naïve. But there was something about Jane that made you hopeful. Talking to her, working with her, reading her inevitably turned your gaze to the future. The title of her first book is intentional: Death and Life, in that order. Even as she became more and more debilitated, I always thought she would return to her typewriter. Editors and writers have to believe in the impossible, otherwise books would never get written. And so I believed, until I got the call.

The day Jane died I spoke with Jason. He and I had been planning a trip to Toronto the following month. We regretted that we were too late but acknowledged that life plays out like this all the time. I reminded him of our lunch at Canoe and how many people recognized her. Oh they loved her there, he said. Just loved her. I think, ultimately, that is the word – love. Jane Jacobs, Writer, wrote with love – love for the past and future of cities and love for the people who lived, and will live, in them. And we loved her in return.

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