

**Statement by Jan Karon**  
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In 1998, there was a Mitford book event in Asheville. The Mitford series was as yet rather low profile, and so I was thrilled in a variety of ways when Ruth Graham, a confessed Mitford fan, invited me to her home in nearby Montreat.

What does one expect to find in the wife of the world's pre-eminent evangelist? Someone in a conservative frock and sensible shoes, perhaps? Though I'd seen many photographs of Ruth over the years, I was completely unprepared for one of the most charming, unpredictable, and energizing women I've ever encountered anywhere.

Mrs. Graham ("Call me Ruth!") tripped (in the old meaning favored by early poets) along the hall to greet me, effervescent and light as air, something like a butterfly with newly-sprung wings or a summer lemonade with a shot of seltzer. She wore a white poets' tunic with full sleeves, and a black leotard with ballet shoes. (not the sort worn in Swan Lake, mind you, but the kind you and I wore in high school).

Because of a long drive behind me, another before me, I was exhausted—and starving. So when Ruth asked if I'd like lunch, I accepted immediately. She left me by a small fire on the hearth of an immense stone fireplace in their sitting room, which was where I began to know Ruth Graham.

Ruth's heart and spirit were expressed in the dozens of family photographs displayed on every surface, in the ravishing mountain views through the windows of the house whose building she supervised as a young wife and mother, in the wide-plank floors she had hand-picked so many years ago, in the intimate way the sofas faced each other in front of the fire, and in the hundreds of books lining the shelves. It was the room of someone who loves learning and beauty and hospitality and life, but most of all loves the One who gave us life. Indeed, to this day, it remains my favorite room.

Quite soon, Ruth appeared with a lovely tray, and on it, a silver teapot, a cup and saucer, a starched and snowy napkin, and a bowl of the most exquisite fresh fruit. "I cut it up, myself," she said with characteristic wry humor. She sat on the sofa opposite, and we talked by what she called in a poem, her "laughing fire."

Soon, we were joined by Dr. Graham ("Call me Billy!"), who was so drop-dead gorgeous, it took my breath away—blue jeans, denim shirt, Roman nose, and that mane of silver hair. Being of Anglican persuasion, I believe I actually looked for a ring I might kiss. Or should I bow? I was beside myself, and he knew it. He gave me a big hug and without putting it in so many words, said 'Relax. You're with family.'

The two of them sat on the sofa, holding hands. Yes. Just like sweethearts.

He teased her, and she gave as good as he sent. He told how she'd climbed a tree only months before and had fallen and hurt her back, and actually seemed a dash moonstruck by his irrepressible wife. Now you can call him Billy and I can call him Billy, but the way she called him Billy was special—tender and ironic, and definitely struck, herself, by the man who has led hundreds of thousands to know Jesus Christ in a direct and personal and life-changing way.

I saw Ruth for the last time, again while in Asheville at a book event. She sent a car for me and when I walked into that hushed household, she wasn't able to greet me in the sunlit hallway in ballet shoes. She was lying on a small bed in her room, coiffed and dressed as if for an intimate tea. Indeed, my favorite living poet was entirely and absolutely beautiful, and I remember wishing that she might be painted in the wonderful afternoon light that moved through the blinds into her cloistered room.

It was difficult for her to speak. She, who had been light and air for so long to so many, couldn't get enough air for true conversation. I talked about her poems and what they meant to me, I kissed her hand, I prayed for her, I felt helpless before the One who is all help, and told her I loved her, which I do and always shall.

Who was Ruth Graham?

She was a woman who heard God, and who gave back the gift He bestowed, pressed down and running over, thereby enriching our lives far more greatly than we can know.

She was a woman we admired for being the supportive and encouraging wife of a world-beloved man, and whom we admired just as much for being, into the bargain, her absolute own, true *self*.

Listen to Ruth in this fragment of a poem she wrote in 1943, of her love and marriage to Billy, and, it seems to me, of more, much more, than even that. :

*Never let it end, God,*

*Never—please—*

*all this growing loveliness,*

*all of these*

*brief moments of*

*fresh pleasure—*

*never let it end,*

*Let us always*

*be a little breathless  
at love's beauty,  
never let us pause to reason  
from a sense of duty;  
never let us  
stop to measure  
just how much to give;  
never let us  
stoop to weigh love,  
let us live—  
and live!*

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