

Rehova Arthur

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [August 15, 2001](#) issue

Four powerful women have been on my mind lately, and I'll drop three of their names here: the late writer Eudora Welty, into whose cart mine once bumped in a Mississippi supermarket; the late Katherine Graham, who hosted a wonderfully grueling grilling that I barely survived at a lunch in 1965; the longer-ago late Eleanor Roosevelt, with whom I shared a 22-story elevator-ride conversation at a conference. You know them. We were not close.

The fourth one is the late Rehova Williams Arthur, who died in July at age 84. Unless you are a South Side Chicagoan, perhaps a member of West Point Baptist Church, where Mrs. Arthur was active for 75 years, or a University of Chicagoan or a reader of the acknowledgments in many of the books written by U. of C. Divinity School faculty during her 28 years there, her name will be new to you.

Fortunate institutions have a person like Mrs. Arthur on their staffs. The official titles of such people do not signal their status, their prestige or their influence. I am not even sure of her title. It did not much matter to the Chicago divines. We looked to her for aid and looked up to her for counsel, encouragement, wisdom and cheer. People like Paul Tillich, Mircea Eliade, Paul Ricoeur, Langdon Gilkey, James Gustafson and David Tracy had their schedules and transportation arranged by her, their handwritings deciphered and their words processed before there were word processors. All benefited from the teams she assembled and from her presence.

Charles Long, the noted African-American historian of religion, and I worked in the two cubby-hole offices snuggled next to Mrs. Arthur's headquarters. So we had the most occasion to observe the traffic around her and to hear the verbal exchanges—always brisk and to the point, since there was much work to do, and always informed and heartening on her part.

Former divinity school student and now pastor Henry Hardy, one of many admirers who testified at her "celebration" (a.k.a. funeral), reminded the congregation of how her office zone was the place where minority students knew they could always get a hearing. Indeed.

Thanks to our many years of work in a propinquity that was both physical and spiritual, I was permitted to know the Arthurs off campus and there to glimpse her larger life. She and I helped see each other through the death of a spouse. While Isidor, her truant-officer husband, lay dying she did not lack company at the hospital. After his death, the West Point Baptist mourners included, if I recall correctly, Mayor Daley, a congressman and other notables, along with ordinary folks that Isidor's life, like Rehova's (or through hers!), had touched.

During a couple of her bouts with cancer I prayed at her side with her children, Regina, Maurice and Byron, whose growings-up had been part of the Swift Hall story. Her church asked me to represent her university with a talk at her 80th birthday "Sweetheart" day. Regrettably, I was away during her final illness and missed out on the privilege of being with her then.

Her children, her pastors and then her friend Minerva Bell, speaking at her final celebration, showed that we were all bit players in a life well lived. Mrs. Arthur was a lifelong organizer, educator, public speaker, fixer, "missionary" and benefactor, as the obituary writers said and the assembled congregation had good reason to remember.

"Re," as she was known, possessed an instinct for finding people in need and ministering to them. Some of these were forlorn students or Chatham-area neighbors. Others were professors. They all benefited from knowing this great lady.