

## IN THE SERVICE OF THE MUSE

Rebecca Blair '80



# Alice Friman

“Would Mozart have served us better if he had quit composing to give piano lessons?” Such is the question posed by Alice Friman, Professor Emerita of English and creative writing at the University of Indianapolis, to describe the requirements of vocation in service. Friman approaches the concept of service skeptically. She notes that the term, by its very nature, implies altruism—a disposition that, for her, smacks of self-righteousness, or, at best, a sacrifice merely prescribed externally. On the other hand, *real* service may be attained, she posits, only when the individual expresses his or her self and when one’s sense of self and one’s vocation align. Indeed, teaching, for Friman, becomes the highest form of service when the teacher “exemplifies someone who loves the material, the ideas,” that is, when the impetus for engagement originates from within. Both inside and outside the college classroom, professor Alice Friman serves in just this way, through her intense love of ideas and the process of sharing them with others.



Born in New York City and raised in Washington Heights on the northern tip of Manhattan, Friman was educated in the New York public schools and in the diverse bustle of the surrounding metropolitan culture. The profusion of museums, skyscrapers, music, and theater, set within an exotic assortment of languages, races, and cultures, composed a rich palette of real-world educational experience. Little Italy, the lower east side, Harlem, Brooklyn, the Bronx, and the Staten Island Ferry—Friman imbibed the nuances of words and cultures, ways of living and being, especially on the daily three-hour commute to and from Brooklyn College, from which she graduated at the age of twenty. As Friman recalls, “New York was a place filled with energy, and I was its child.”

Never one to embrace unquestioningly the regularity of formal systems, Friman notes that she “was good in school, but never worked too hard at it until college,” preferring her passions for dancing and, she says with a smile, falling in love. In fact, passion has been and continues to be a key element in Friman’s life, the essence of the link between self and service. Her father and mother ran a small business, and the family inhabited a four-room apartment, which Friman describes as “nothing fancy.” Though she is Jewish, she never participated conventionally in any congregation, emphasizing “life and its living” over formal religious practice. To her religion was “going to Grandma’s for the high holidays,” in contrast to faith, which for her is “a highly private affair,” an internal process of intense questioning and discernment.

The educational process has long been understood as the process by which knowledge is passed from one individual to another. More significant, however, is the work of evoking the desire to acquire such knowledge within the individual. If the task of higher education—specifically a liberal arts education—concerns helping students identify their abilities and their values in order to gain a sense of direction and purpose in life, then, according to Friman, the passion for intellectual, spiritual, and personal engagement drives such an inquiry. In such a setting, college teachers, functioning as mentors, serve as models for what it means to discern and live out such an inner calling, even if, in the living out, one must choose a singular or unconventional path.

Friman’s vocational journey commenced in earnest when, married and pregnant, she moved with her husband to Dayton, OH, and then, four years later, to Indianapolis. Unprepared for the culture shock of living in the relatively homogenous Midwest, Friman would later seek out diverse experience, traveling to Greece, England, Kenya, Tanzania, Scotland, Ireland, and Italy, and for a brief time, living and working in Australia. But in those first years in the midwest, busy with diapers and earaches, she realized the need to continue her formal education in search of answers to the intellectual and existential questions that plagued her. What she found as a result of this reflective process was not the answers but, “more importantly—the questions.”



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Having identified a set of important life questions, Friman headed to the Indiana University annex in Indianapolis (before the creation of IUPUI), and later to Butler University, earning an MA in English in 1971. She selected English because in language, she discovered a rich tapestry of meaning and emotion, a way of knowing that speaks to both the mind and the passions.

Indiana Central College hired Friman to teach, first as an adjunct, and then in 1974 as a full-time faculty member. Yet she experienced a climate not entirely welcoming for a Jewish woman with a New York accent. While she had valued books and intellectual systems as instruments of intellectual inquiry and challenge, the means to internal discernment, the value system which she confronted most com-

monly at the College appeared to value conformity and the use of knowledge to affirm a more restricted set of pietistic values. Such experience placed in sharp relief the inner calling to service that Friman had earlier taken for granted. She realized with a deeper urgency the need to teach processes of intellectual and spiritual inquiry to students who sought to journey down paths outside denominational dogma or institutional expectations, paths more familiar to the humane tradition of the liberal arts as the channel to discover what it means to be truly human.

“Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly.”<sup>1</sup> This dictum from Henry David Thoreau captures the spirit of living deliberately and passionately from a steady internal center that drives Alice Friman’s life as a poet and teacher. Adherence to rules and values systems for their own sake, she posits, doesn’t advance education, generate self-understanding, or essentially serve others. Rather, careful and intentional reflection enriched by immersion in a cacophony of competing ideas, which one tests and chooses, often in conversation with others, furthers one’s true education. In this context, one takes ultimate responsibility for oneself and one’s ideas.

Professor Friman comments that, for the most part, she ignored the college motto, “Education for Service,” as it was commonly defined during her tenure, because it seemed that its true purpose was to create conformists, not only in the student body, but compliance and conformity in the faculty. At that time, the faculty was vastly overworked and understood the real meaning of “Education for Service” because “we were sure doing it.” Within the emergence of a more liberated institu-

tional and educational context, this phrase acquires a more radical, or essential, nature. In this larger context, faculty serve by demonstrating how they have arrived at the present moment in their continuing journeys of spiritual and intellectual discovery, by showing how to inhabit the present while bringing experience from their individual pasts and anticipating the divergent leadings of their futures. Such a process, for Friman, embodies both vocation and service.

In addition to teaching, Friman identifies writing poetry as her true passion, her “sweet hell,” as she calls it. Though her teaching skills have been recognized with a teaching award from the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education in Washington, DC, as well as by the praise offered from numerous current and former students, writing poetry completely fulfills her vocation as a different form of service. She has published eight collections of poetry, most recently *The Book of the Rotten Daughter* and *Inverted Fire*, from the BkMk Press of the University of Missouri in Kansas City, and *Zoo*, from the University of Arkansas Press, which won both Truman State University’s Ezra Pound Poetry Award and the New England Poetry Club’s Sheila Margaret Motton Prize. Individual poems by Friman have appeared in such prestigious American literary magazines as *Poetry*, *Georgia Review*, *Boulevard*, *Southern Review*, and *Gettysburg Review*, as well as the British magazines *Poetry Review* and *London Review of Books*. Her poems have also been reprinted in anthologies from St. Martin’s, Prentice–Hall, Longman, Beacon Press, the University of Minnesota Press, and the University of Iowa Press.

Alice Friman has received fellowships from the Indiana Arts Council and the Arts Council of Indianapolis. In addition, she has been invited to teach at Curtin University in Australia, and had writer-in-residence appointments at such artist colonies as Yaddo and the MacDowell Colony. She is now the poetry editor of *Arts & Letters*, a literary journal published by Georgia College & State University in Milledgeville, Georgia, where she lives with her husband, Bruce Gentry. Among her numerous awards are three prizes from the Poetry Society of America and the 2002 James Boatwright Prize for Poetry. Yet, despite all of these accolades, Alice Friman views the true measure of her poetry as the expression of an essential gift that speaks its unique language to the world at large.

If the measure of one’s vocation is the ability to demonstrate the process of discernment and its workings in one’s life, then we have only to read Friman’s poetry to witness her vocation as service. By slicing into the realities of human existence, the mutability of human relationships, the inexplicable violence of nature, the dazzling capacity of language to reveal and conceal, she presents for her readers an honest instructive model of inquiry, the journey of self both passionate and intellectual, seeking and questioning. By faithfully serving the Muse of inquiry and experience, professor Alice Friman embodies the liberal ideal of education and fulfills her vocation of service in the process.

— *Honorary Degree 2002*



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- B (p. 97) Photograph of Friman, originally appeared on the cover of the Nov. 1987 edition of *Developments*, a quarterly publication of University of Indianapolis. Photograph used with permission of the Publications office.
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- D (p. 98) Alice Friman. Photo by Lillian Elaine Wilson provided by Alice Friman with permission to reprint.
- E (p. 99) Alice Friman after receiving honorary degree at UIndy in June '02, Photograph originally appeared in *Portico*. Used with permission of the Publications office.