
**“Thanking Mary Higgins
On the Occasion of Her 80th Birthday”**

**Remarks at a Fundraiser for
The Wilhelm Reich Infant Trust Endowment Fund**

**The Williams Club
New York City
October 21, 2005**

Good evening, everyone, and welcome. Thank you all so much for coming. This—the formal presentation of the evening—will be brief and will comprise remarks from several individuals, followed by a musical selection by our good friend, jazz pianist Andy Kahn, featuring songs chosen especially for this occasion.

We’re here tonight, quite simply, to say a long overdue “Thank-you” to a unique and remarkable woman who, since 1959 as Trustee of The Wilhelm Reich Infant Trust, has shouldered the awesome responsibility of administering the Estate of Wilhelm Reich according to the wishes of his Last Will & Testament.

For years, many of us who are friends and supporters of the Museum and Trust have conferred among ourselves, expressing interest in an occasion such as this: an occasion where, in some small way, we might convey our gratitude to Mary Higgins for all that she has done for nearly five decades to honestly and pragmatically preserve Reich’s legacy for future generations.

And whatever gratitude we articulate here this evening will be small indeed when compared with the magnitude of Mary’s accomplishments, when compared with the enormity of a task undertaken in 1959 by a young woman, barely 34-years old.

Regrettably, history is replete with stories of great leaders passing away and leaving an aftermath of confusion, uncertainty, fear and acrimony. Pioneers in industry, politics, religion, social movements and science. Family patriarchs and matriarchs whose legacies become weakened and vulnerable, whose final wishes are compromised by those after them. And so it was when Reich died in November 1957 in the Lewisburg Penitentiary at the age of sixty.

It’s not our purpose here tonight to revisit the explicit difficulties and conflicts following Reich’s death. After all, if things had gone differently, if people had been guided by their better instincts, perhaps that would’ve been the exception rather than the rule. And perhaps that would’ve been too much to hope for.

But what does it say about both human frailty and human ambition that no one among Reich’s associates and colleagues stepped forward to assume the mantle of the Trusteeship and carry out the specifics of his Last Will and Testament?

What does it say about the ephemeral nature of human bonds and human relationships that no cohesive group assembled following Reich's death to categorically insure the fulfillment of his final wishes?

And what does it say about the fragile quality of happenstance and sheer luck that an individual who never met Reich nor worked with him, who was not a physician, psychoanalyst, psychiatrist or scientist—merely a young woman for whom Reich's work resonated personally and deeply—that such a person would emerge and offer to take on the burden of the Trusteeship for the simple reason that no one else would? And this young woman reasoned that if no one else would, then Reich's legacy might well be lost forever.

No one today should ever look back from the vantage of 2005 and dare to diminish or misrepresent the dire situation as it was in 1957 and 1958:

Reich tragically persecuted and then suddenly gone. His books banned by order of a United States Federal Court. Three tons of his books burned in New York City by court order. Several boxes of his publications burned outside his laboratory in Maine, much of his legacy literally consigned to ashes. The chilling effect of a Federal Court Injunction essentially silencing much of Reich's work, including the continuation of his promising medical research here in America.

And in rural Rangeley, Maine: his 200-plus acre property of Orgonon abandoned, overgrown and choked with weeds. We have black and white photographs that document how bleak that situation was. The Orgone Energy Observatory was boarded up, frequently vandalized, all of its locks broken by unknown intruders. The entire property and all of its buildings on the way to irreparable decay, unattended and unprotected against the harsh New England elements.

And what of Reich's archives, which he had stored in a photographic darkroom on the first-floor of the Observatory and in a large closet in his second-floor study? When Mary first visited the Observatory, she discovered the archives were gone. Removed illegally by Aurora Karrer—the last woman in Reich's life—who had the Archives loaded into a truck one day and transported hundreds of miles away to the house that she shared with her mother in Bethesda, Maryland.

What a sad and tragic irony, that Wilhelm Reich—truly one of the most original thinkers of the 20th century or any century—should have his legacy and his wishes so disrespected, so diminished and so pitifully neglected.

And when his Last Will & Testament was finally probated in 1958 and all specific personal bequests were fulfilled, \$823 was all that was left for Mary Higgins to carry out the major precepts of the will. Which Reich had enumerated quite clearly.

He wrote: *“I made the consideration of secure transmission to future generations of a vast empire of scientific accomplishments the guide in my last dispositions. To my mind, the foremost task to be fulfilled was to safeguard the truth about my life and work against distortion and slander after my death.”* A few paragraphs later, Reich stipulated that the Trust shall *“operate and maintain the property at Orgonon under the name and style of The Wilhelm Reich Museum ...The grounds should be kept neat and clean, and repairs should not be neglected.”*

And regarding his archives, Reich directed “*that they should be put away and stored for 50 years to secure their safety from destruction and falsification by anyone interested in the falsification and destruction of historical truth.*”

\$823 to do all of this.

Today, that would translate into approximately \$5,675. And whenever I look at those black and white photos of Orgonon back in 1958, I think what a paltry sum that would be today: less than \$6,000 to transform Orgonon from the ruin that it was to the beautiful and vibrant property and Museum that it is today.

But that’s exactly what Mary Higgins did.

Not to mention recovering the stolen archives, which Mary also succeeded in doing. So that today they are safe and secure— unchanged, unaltered and well-preserved—and currently being prepared for access to researchers and scholars for generations to come.

And Reich’s banned and burned literature: starting in 1960, Mary arranged with Farrar, Straus & Giroux—which would become one of the most reputable publishers in the world— to publish Reich’s books, his old titles as well as some new ones. Today, 21 books are available, Reich’s work is represented in over 21 languages throughout the world, and additional materials are available exclusively in the Museum Bookstore.

The fact is, thanks to Mary, all of Reich’s books, research bulletins and journals that were destroyed in the 1950s, are available today in some format: hardcover, paperback, Xerox or microfilm.

But this isn’t a story that often gets told, is it? Over the years it’s a story that seems to have been lost or distorted. And for decades Mary refused to write or speak publicly about the difficulties, challenges, achievements and triumphs of her tenure as Trustee and Museum Director; refused to consciously draw any spotlight to herself out of both genuine modesty and—more importantly— her commitment to maintaining the focus of the Trust where it belonged: on the truth and the legacy of Wilhelm Reich.

In fact, it wasn’t until two years ago—in this very room and at my urging—that Mary would even speak publicly about her experiences over the past four decades. And you should also know this: when I first broached the idea of this evening, Mary was adamantly opposed to it as I knew she would be. Only when I persisted, at the behest of numerous friends and supporters, did Mary finally and reluctantly agree.

But I think it is fitting and proper that we assess the legacy of Mary Higgins. And so from the vantage of 2005, we should all pause and ask ourselves, “What if?” Like the George Bailey character in the film *It’s a Wonderful Life*, we should ask ourselves, “What if there had been no Mary Higgins?” or “What if Mary’s journey in life had taken her elsewhere, so that she never encountered the work of Wilhelm Reich? What if?”

What would've happened to Orgonon, Reich's abandoned home, laboratory and research center? Well, I've been going to Rangeley since I was a child, since the 1950s, and I have no doubt that Orgonon would've been sold, eventually developed into private homes and forgotten.

And the archives? From all I know of the situation, it's highly unlikely that these materials would've ever found the care, protection and organization that Mary provided. It is more probable that these materials would've been distributed to various locations and into various private hands, which has happened with other Reich memorabilia.

As for the books: it's likely some of the titles would have been published anyway, as we know some were. But certainly not 21 titles, probably not in 21 languages and probably not from a publisher with the reputation and distribution capacity of Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

I once asked Mary if, in hindsight, she had any regrets about her decision to become the Trustee. Her response was immediate: "No, I've never regretted it," she told me.

And so for that decision—and for the joy that Mary has taken in it—we should all be grateful.

Finally, on a personal note: for the past few years it has been a privilege and a pleasure and an intellectual challenge to be working so closely with Mary Higgins on all manner of issues regarding the Museum and the Trust. I look forward to many more years of our working together.

I am constantly inspired by Mary's wisdom, her diligence, her intellectual honesty and vitality, by her acuity of thought and her precise vision. Not to mention Mary's physical vigor. I consider myself an excellent hiker, but when Mary and I are walking some of the more strenuous trails at Orgonon, it's usually Mary setting the pace and me keeping up with her.

But what I value most is the personal trust and friendship of such a unique and remarkable woman.

Thank you, Mary, for everything. And Happy Birthday.

*Kevin Hinchey
The Wilhelm Reich Infant Trust*