

## **EULOGY FOR FREDA GOULD REBELSKY – Saturday July 25**

### **Chaplain Christine Tinker**

**The woman of valor** is described as one who is energetic, righteous, and capable. What could be a more apt description of our friend Freda! Her life was each of these and more. In this time together I want to use this text to highlight some of the ways in which Freda's life has impacted the world through which she traveled - physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually.

Place shaped Freda. Growing up in New York in a left-wing family in a left-wing community laid the foundation for her awareness of the needs of the poor and oppressed. Her ability to organize in order to change repressive structures was formed in the womb and nurtured first by her parents and then by those who taught, mentored and encouraged her throughout her life. As she noted in her paper for the American Psychological Association, given in Los Angeles in 1994:

“I learned at home that it is necessary to say what you think about essential issues and to join with others to make a stronger impact”

**Freda girded herself with strength** – she continues in that same paper to state “I have repeatedly seen that my voice is louder, clearer, more forceful when I join with others. (I also feel safer when held by others' warmth and courage – as I try to hold my students, so that they, too, are courageous.) Gifted in mind and spirit Freda drank deeply from the opportunities afforded her. She learned from everyone – old and young, poor and rich, simple and intellectual giants – she took what they offered, sifted it through until she received the gems of wisdom and integrated them into her life and action. She sought daily to deepen her understanding of each relationship, find application for the knowledge she acquired, and seek opportunities to use it all to better humankind.

**Her lamp never goes out at night.** Judge, Justine Wise Polier, applying these words to her own life, and the lives of other Jewish women forging a way professionally in the early 1960's says “So, one lived two lives – one worked during the day at one's job, and then pitched into the things that seemed most important at night.” This describes Freda's life; she found time for study, teaching, research, family, friends, culture,

activism, fundraising, writing, hobbies, playing the cello, acting ...the list goes on..... She shared a loving family with her husband Bill, whom she credits with enabling her to balance all she needed to do by sharing the responsibilities of home life with her. Their home was open to everyone, and Freda deemed it especially important that students felt welcome in her home. She said “I wanted students to see my husband, child, dog, house – to know that there were connections between work and the rest of my life.” Freda’s energy was boundless and she accomplished all of this while learning to live with a chronic illness that plagued her for the remainder of her life. Her spirit was indomitable.

Freda’s life was marked with “firsts” – she was the first teenage member of Linnaean Society (a bird-watching group) first female on a tenure line in the Psychology Department at Boston University, where she taught for 34 years, and her lists of first in research and honors is too long to share here. Take time to read her obituary, and then enter Freda G. Rebelsky into your Search Engine where you will find numerous articles about and by her, her accomplishments will leave you breathless.

**She is clothed with strength and splendor** Bella Abzug reflecting on this line in the text says “I believe very deeply that the hope of an effective women’s political movement lies in reaching out....” Freda I believe would whole heartedly support that concept; it was the bedrock of her activism, the foundation of her teaching and living. In her words...”In adulthood, I learned that we had been taught the Jewish idea Tikkum olam, that we are here on earth for a purpose, to help God complete the making of a just world, to hasten the kingdom of God through human effort.” Her students were inspired by her enthusiasm; they went on to change the world, becoming professors, researchers, chairs of departments, clinicians, lawyers, politicians, novelists, film makers, and more. They learned intellectual and moral courage from Freda, and through their relationships with her they learned to be less prejudiced and to love ideas. Her mentor Howard Zinn described her in these words “She was a challenger, a rebel, and a terrifically popular teacher.”

**Her mouth is full of wisdom.** Freda found her “voice” at an early age, but became more assured and confident in raising that voice as she built on her successes. Influenced by teachers like Bruno Bettelheim and her husband Bill whom she says just “somehow enabled people to move” she discovered her strengths and capitalized on them. She relished her accomplishments, saw the fruits of her teaching, and knew the extent of her abilities yet still she said “a part of me doesn’t believe it”. In spite of her achievements, she stated “I have always felt like an outsider, a chronic outsider (as Jane Loevinger said). I have discovered we all feel this way a great deal of the time”. Freda was able to assess her effectiveness, she said “I was always a good middle person, getting things started, and not staying around.” Howard Zinn recalled a time when he was attending his first faculty meeting, it was “very boring” until he heard a strong voice from the back of the room “challenging what was going on.” It was Rebecky. From that point forward the two of them worked together on the frontlines of causes at BU. It is not hard for any of who knew Freda to imagine her “voice” ringing out and to wake us up to the reality of the moment.

**Let her works praise her in the gates** Another respected contemporary of Freda’s, Chemist Gertrude Elion reflecting on this text said “What greater joy can you have than to know what impact your work has had on people’s lives?” Freda recognized the value of her legacy, and now we honor her not simply by recognizing that legacy but by exercising the influence she had on us – to be more alive, more adventurous – to find our own voice and challenge ourselves to fulfill our own purpose.

Sam, Michelle, William, Jonathan and Daniel – you have been blessed with the rare treasure that was Freda, woman of valor. To you she was mother, mother-in-law grandmother. She loved each of you with her whole heart, she was so happy to be here in Grinnell where she could interact with you on a regular basis. You brought joy and laughter to her life. She has shared particular gifts with you that none of us are aware of and have not been mentioned today, but they are precious memories to be tucked in your heart to keep for courage and comfort the rest of your days.

To all of you, friends of Freda remember the woman of valor who walked in your midst. Learn from your time with her; accept her challenge to live every moment of life to its fullest. In a talk to residents at Cadbury Commons a retirement community in Massachusetts she urged them to be happy optimistic people and assured them that in so doing they would live into a healthy old age. She also reminded them that connection was important - - she said “researchers found that people tend to be happier when they are attached to someone or something, when they recognize that they matter to other people and give them a sense of purpose.” She would challenge you to be happy and connected.

Let me share one final story from a Boston Globe interview given in 2006, when asked, “After more than seven decades, what keeps your passion from dissolving into cynicism. “ Freda replied “I went to my eye doctor the other day, and he said, “What are you doing these days?” “I told him, I’m doing what I’ve always done. I’m trying to make the arts available to everybody. I’m trying to make the world less racist. I’m trying to make the environment more healthy. I’m working for peace.” He said, “You’re not doing a very good job.” “I said, “You don’t know how it would be if I were not doing this.”

Freda Rebelsky we are fortunate to have known you, to have been loved by you, and we have been taught and inspired by you. Your spirit lives on in us and I pray each will, according to her or his ability, strive to live knowing “that we are here on earth for a purpose, to help God complete the making of a just world, to hasten the kingdom of God through human effort.”

We close with this saying of Hillel that Freda regularly used to open or close her classes and speeches; it is printed on the back of the bulletin:

Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 1:14

If I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, when?