

Remembrances of Freda Rebelsky

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For the Celebration of the Life of Freda Rebelsky

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In hearing of my mother's death, Russell Osgood, President of Grinnell College wrote "*She was a life force of note.*" She certainly was. She had an impact and was a big presence in almost every thing she did. Being the son of such a notable life force is a privilege in that it let me see what kind of impact one person can have, to hear from people she touched, and to "learn at the feet of the master", as it were. I hope my comments can let you share a bit of that privilege, too.

I know that even though many people in the room here are comparatively new friends, made in this past year in Grinnell, mom cared deeply about the friendships she made here, and I've heard that a large number of you feel the same way. Since you are new friends, I thought I might share a bit of little Freda's life with you.

Freda was born in New York in 1931. You can see the roots of her life in those early days: She lived in housing created by the Amalgamated clothing workers union. She went to marches with her parents. She learned in Girl Scouts that one should "make new friends, but keep the old, one is silver and the other gold". She took dance lessons with Martha Graham and worked as a secretary at Peoples's Songs. She enjoyed walking in the nearby Van Cortland Park and joined the Linnean Society of birdwatchers. And she enjoyed visits to her grandfather's farm in New Jersey, visits which helped her appreciate her recent new life in Iowa.

As I tried writing about the many years since childhood, I found myself with many more pages than would be reasonable (or possible) to read. I will, instead, summarize as best I can. She married a wonderful man who changed her life and she lost him much too early. She performed groundbreaking research in a variety of fields. She was an outstanding teacher, which won her a number of awards, including the first American Psychological Association's first Outstanding Teacher of Psychology award. She faced challenges at being a professional woman at a time when such professionals were rare. She advised friends, students, and people she didn't even know. She gave her time, money, and enthusiasm to a variety of causes, from social activism to the arts. She served on the boards of organizations as diverse as the Boston Lyric Opera, BU Hillel, and Boston Community Change. She inspired the people around her. She enjoyed long walks in the Arnold Arboretum, exhibitions at the Museum of Fine Arts, and a wide variety of concerts. She kept friendships from as far back as childhood, but seemed to have added a group of new friends each time we talked. She kept learning new things. She raised a son who strives to live up to all that she did (or even to list all that she did).

Given her many and constant activities, her friends "out east" worried a lot about her move to Grinnell. While they knew she'd appreciate being so close to her grandchildren (and to Michelle, Kathy, and I), they worried that she wouldn't have

enough to do. They needn't have worried. In Grinnell, she quickly made new friends, joined a variety of groups (she particularly enjoyed sit-and-knit and the book club, although she was clearly looking forward to being a part of the poetry club), took courses, went to events at the Mayflower, attended almost every concert at the College, became best friends with "the other grandmother", Kathy Steele, and spent as much time as she could with her grandchildren. It was a good year.

As I reflect back on my mother's life, four characteristics shine through. First, *she cared deeply about people* and did what she could to help those around her. Second, she considered it a calling to *make a difference* in the world. (Sometimes making a difference was something as small as saying "Please repeat the question for those of us in the back!") Third, she made *the arts and nature* a core part of her life. Finally, she always approached life with a *positive and upbeat* attitude.

So, I ask that as you remember my mother, you try to do the same. Value and care for the people around you. Strive to make a difference in the world. Appreciate the wonders that God has given us and that artists and musicians have made. And, most importantly, focus not at the bad things that happen, but look to the great opportunities that life makes available. We may not be able to do it as well as she did, but we can try.

Like Chaplain Tinker, I close with the words of Hillel that Freda spoke so often:

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?