

Living Fiercely

by Rosalie de Rosset

Mother's Day is almost upon us, and just as I was remembering my father a few weeks ago, I have been thinking of my mother. At ninety-five, almost blind from macular degeneration and partly deaf, my mother is fiercely alive. She has always been fiercely alive. Born in 1915, she was the first child of my Swiss-German grandparents, also always fiercely alive, my grandfather a Baptist minister and missionary, my grandmother, the long-suffering, strong, unsentimental mate who would live to be 97. My mother did not have it easy; the first of six children born in nine years, she had to work hard early as so many of that generation did. Intelligent and curious, she took advantage of every opportunity that came her way though they were few and far between. She walked a long way for music lessons, read every good book she could get her hands on, and made it to college, later than she would have liked to go. There was never any money.

In the sixty-eight years between then and now, she met and married my father (walking twelve miles to a nearby town to pick up the material for her wedding dress), went to the mission field by boat in the early forties and began the work in Peru that still exists today and about which she still cares fiercely. Those first years in Peru were far from comfortable. She told me once that she thought at times God had forsaken her. Arriving with my sister and brother (two years and ten months respectively), my parents lived for a time in a hotel room inhabited by mice and cockroaches, used an unspeakably dirty bathroom down the hall and learned Spanish by listening to people talk.

While my father was congenial, funny, peace-loving, and resourceful, my mother was the impetus that got things started and made sure they continued. My father gave her credit for that; he knew she never gave up; her fierceness did not tolerate no for an answer; there was very little she thought could not get done. She was insistent, yes, and pushy, and things happened around her. In an illiterate culture, she made sure hundreds of people learned to read (men and women); she took her nursing skills and taught women to take care of themselves and their children; she trained dozens of nationals to play musical instruments, sometimes starting their lessons on a cardboard keyboard. She found a way for people with no resources to go to school, to have a future. She used her artistic gifts to illustrate choruses and stories in the most compelling ways, visited the poor in desolate neighborhoods carrying a big stick to chase away dogs, all the while home-schooling four children and keeping a household running. There was nothing she ever learned that she did not use for the work. Her compassion for the disenfranchised and concern for the souls of everyone she met knew no boundaries, sometimes to her own detriment. The evidence of that energy remains in the churches that still exist, in the seminary that continues to grow, in the lives of men, women and their children to whom she gave hope. She still gets letters from many.

Today, as I said, my mother still, in Dylan Thomas's beautiful words, lives "raging against the dying of the light." She still talks about how much she has to do; she does not accept easily the limitations of age. Almost blind, she writes halting letters to her friends, not wanting them to think, she says, that she has forgotten them. It is a strong legacy. And I am grateful. For Prime Time America, this is Rosalie de Rosset.