

EULOGY FOR MY MOTHER, DOROTHY FADER JANIS

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When I spoke at my father's funeral, a little more than 15 years ago, I found myself saying that my mother had given my father a song to sing. It was the song of his life, and he sang it with all the love and joy that was in him. The words I spoke then I still feel to be true.

But now my mother is gone too, and my focus is on her. It's a little hard, however, for me to get my mother into focus – maybe I'm a little like a fish trying to describe the water he's swimming in. Looking back, I see more in the idea of my mother's song-giving than I did 15 years ago. Now it seems to me not just a way to understand the love between my mother and my father and how their relationship worked, but maybe even more a way to understand who my mother was. Giving other people a song to sing was an instinct with her – an instinct and a rather amazing ability.

I want to tell a story from my childhood, a very little story about my mother's instinct to give people a song to sing and her ability to get them to sing, her determination to make that happen. It's a story that seems to me increasingly remarkable even as it is receding further away into the past. And I want to put my story in its setting.

When I was 10 years old, in the very early 1950's, my parents and my mother's parents were co-owners of a 24-family rooming house in Rockaway Beach. This rooming house was not just a single building; it was several buildings that formed a U-shaped cluster around a circular patio. In the middle of the patio was a tall lamp – like a street-lamp – so patio social life could continue well into the evening. From the open side of the U-shaped cluster, you looked towards a big lot of sand, then the boardwalk and the beach and the ocean and its foam-topped waves. The U-shaped cluster around the patio included a big old brown-shingle 1890's mansion, a group of little seaside bungalows, and a winterized, 4-family building of yellow stucco, where we lived in the winter, at the end of an almost wholly deserted block. My sister and I roller-skated around the patio in complete isolation. I felt as though the whole seascape was mine; I was king of the beach and the boardwalk and even the ocean.

Every summer, however, 20 or so families would move in, with a whole bunch of kids. It was ever so lively and intoxicating, but it was also the case in the summer that I was no

longer king of the beach. That summer, when I was 10, there was a good group of boys more or less my age, with whom I became pals, but especially with Melvin Warshavsky. He was a year or two older than the rest of us, so we all looked up to him and did what he did, and I also considered him my best friend. But then Melvin and I had a fight – I don't remember about what – and I was miserable. For a couple of days, I couldn't face Melvin, and I was isolated from the other boys too. Maybe I told my mother about the situation. More likely, she herself noticed that I was unhappy and she asked me why. When she understood what was going on, she determined to fix it. She got out her accordion and went out into the patio, and, at her insistence, I followed her, feeling painfully awkward. Somehow, with her bold invitations and with her songs and accordion-playing, she managed to gather Melvin and the other boys around her in the patio, and they all began to have a jolly time – me included! And somehow, whatever cause for quarrel there had been between Melvin and me was now entirely erased and forgotten. Melvin and I were friends again. How did my mother do it?

And it wasn't just the literal songs that she supplied that had such an effect on my life and on the life of my family. The whole Rockaway Beach adventure was like a song that she had given us to sing. The whole crazy idea of buying a 24-family rooming house was *her* crazy idea, and everyone in her whole family listened to it and got involved in it. Her sister, my Aunt Lillie, and her brother-in-law Uncle Lou lent money to finance the venture. Lillie and my cousins, her children, came from Schenectady to spend a whole summer with us at the beach, with Lou flying down on weekends. That's how I really got to know my cousins. Then my mother's brother, my Uncle Howard, with my late beloved Aunt Doris, took one of the bungalows for a summer or two, and Doris's dear mother Jessie rented one of the smaller places. My earliest memories of my cousin Diane, ten years younger than I, are on the patio at Rockaway Beach.

Mixed in with my mother's song-giving, and perhaps indispensable to it, was a capacity for being quite determined at any given moment – a capacity for strong and not very reflective action based on her own impulses. “The word is ‘mercurial,’ ” my father once said about her, almost at the end of his life. He said it with deep love and affection but also with an admixture of exasperation. My mother made a lot of impulsive and resolute moves in the course of her life, some of them truly wonderful and some of them not so wonderful.

But in Rockaway Beach, for a few years at least, we had, so to speak, a new and fantastically exciting set of songs to sing. My father would come home every day from teaching school, change his clothes, and become Super-Handyman, using all the skills that he had learned from his contractor father. And when my mother looked at that patio, what she saw was not just a place to sit in the sun and shmooze, but a place to put on shows. So every Saturday night was Talent Night at the Ocean Colony – for that was the name she gave our rooming-house. My mother couldn't bring her piano out on to the patio, so she bought an accordion, and she learned, more or less, to play the accordion – at least enough to accompany others and get them to sing.

One of the favorite Saturday night acts was Sidney Waldman singing “Oy Mame! Bin Ich Varliebt!” (Oy Mama, Am I in Love!), opening his arms wide to express emotion and embrace his patio audience. I still sing that song, accompanying myself at the piano – it's part of my lifelong repertoire. I sang it to my mother just a few days ago at Belmont Manor Nursing Home when she was quite tired and unresponsive and I didn't think she had heard me. But, then we wheeled her back to her room and, as we were transferring her to her reclining chair, she half-murmured half-sang “Oy Mame! Bin Ich Varliebt!”

Back to Rockaway Beach. Once or twice during the summer in the early years, my mother thought we should have not just an informal Talent Night but a full-fledged show. So my father built a stage, and my grandmother baked tray upon tray of kashe and potato knishes, and rugelach, and the best apple strudel I have ever tasted. And what did *I* do? I put on a kiddie show, and I organized a baby beauty contest. A mother from all the way down the street got wind of the contest and wanted to enter her little girl in it. She came to our house one evening asking for Mr. Norman. My mother told her that Mr. Norman was 7 years old and fast asleep. If it weren't for my mother, with her impulsive decisions and her songs to be sung, how would I ever have got to be not only king of the beach but also a kiddie impressario?

As I was growing up, some of my best times with my mother were walking adventures quickly decided upon, brisk walks to get someplace fairly far away – like a Mill Outlet in the next town – which she thought it would be fun to explore or to shop at. Looking back on my walks with her, I realize that all the while I was receiving a kind of mostly unspoken instruction on how to enjoy the brisk stretching movement of my legs, how to enjoy the sharp winter air in my nostrils and lungs, how to appreciate the people and the buildings that we were passing as we walked.

The great thing in life for my mother, it seems, was to be feeling alive, to be exercising one's vitality. And what vitality she had! We all felt it. The downside was that as her vitality ebbed, when she could no longer affect other people so readily and steadily with her energy and quickness, she wasn't sure any more what to be interested in, what to do with herself. But her vitality, physical and emotional, was so great, it seems, that it kept her going for 97 years, even without a great deal of active engagement in the life around her in the years since my father's death. And her capacity for determined action was amazingly evident in her very clear, verbally explicit decision a few weeks ago to stop eating and drinking, to begin the process of moving out of this life. Her heart was so strong, it seemed, that a final fast was her best and maybe only choice for beginning that process, the final move.

Coming back to the giving and singing of songs. My mother liked to say that life is made of moments. I don't think she meant just any moments. She meant intense and vivid moments, when one experiences one's own emotional or cognitive vitality. Singing a song can be like that – certainly the way *she* sang songs. We all sang in our family, giving ourselves over to the song we were singing at the moment. For my mother, life was *made* of moments, and some of the best of those moments happened in singing and in getting others to sing. Less than two weeks ago she was still putting over a song – *her* song, “Am I Blue?” – with her characteristic gestures and facial expressions, even when she no longer had the strength to lift her voice for singing.

About ten years ago, when my father was already long dead, my mother had a dream. She was lying in bed in the middle of the night, but my father had got up and was getting dressed to go out. He said to her: “Come on, Dot. Let's go!” She told me that dream, and I said “Well, Ma, some day you're going to get up and get dressed and go out with Dad. You'll be together again.” My mother liked that answer, but it took quite a long time for it to come true.

Maybe my mother's song and her song-giving are ended now. I'm not so sure. I think I can still hear my mother's song. When my mother was growing up, Irving Berlin wrote: “The song is ended, but the melody lingers on.” Maybe *that's* what I'm still hearing. But good-bye for now, Ma.