



## Ode to a grandmother

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National Post

Friday, April 01, 2005

In 1962, the great literary critic Northrop Frye delivered a series of lectures over the CBC titled *The Educated Imagination*. Frye's message was delivered with his characteristic indirection and erudition, but simply put it was this: If a tender mind was delivered into his care, he'd begin by filling it up with the Greek myths, Bible stories and other ancient lore.

One of Frye's listeners was my grandmother, Florence Rosberg. And as it happened, she had just such a tender mind at hand: me, her first grandchild.

Over the next 10 years, I would be the test kitchen for my grandmother's educational theories. She read to me from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and put into my hands Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* almost as soon as I learned to read. She told me stories from Shakespeare, *Beowulf* and the *Book of Judges*, introduced me to Robert Graves and later Mary Renault, and hundreds of other stories, poems and books. The library in her house in Niagara Falls, Ont., was my first playground. And when I grew older, she extended her experimentation from the literary to the visual. She bought me a copy of H.W. Jansen's *History of Art* for a 12th birthday present and took me on tours of the Albright-Knox museum in Buffalo.

I don't know that Northrop Frye would have been pleased with the result – frankly, I rather doubt it – but I do know this: To the extent that my imagination has been educated at all, it was Florence Rosberg who educated it.

My grandmother died last weekend, on March 27, 13 years plus a day after the death of her eldest daughter, my mother, Barbara Frum. She was 91. She retained her brilliant mind and enchanting spirit undimmed to the last moments of her life.

As a young woman, she attended the University of Michigan. In her senior year there, she boarded with a professor of statistics with a special interest in intelligence testing. For fun, he asked her to take one of his tests: She achieved the highest score he had ever witnessed. In the days before word processors, she was always able to type flawless letters – not because she was a perfect typist, but because whenever she made an error, she'd just ransack her limitless vocabulary for a substitute word that used the erroneous keystroke.

Her humour was equally limitless. When her doctors prescribed shock treatment to regularize her heartbeats, she doubted that it would work: "Tell them I've seen everything. I'm very hard to shock."

But I owe a more personal debt for her direct education of and influence upon me. I will never be able to requite it. Perhaps though I can at least offer an accounting of it. And surely this page, which for my sake she read every week and now will never read again, is the appropriate place to render that account.

One of my grandmother's favourite books was *The Autobiography* by John Stuart Mill. Mill begins his story with a searing account of his own catastrophically misguided education. Mill's father crammed young John's head with so much knowledge at so early an age that he drove his son into a nervous breakdown by age 21: "I was ... left stranded at the commencement of my voyage, with a well-equipped ship and a rudder, but no sail."

Mill recovered by plunging himself into the arts, and especially poetry, and by learning to apply his energy to the study of the personality as well as the problems of society. My grandmother pretty early on decided that there was a warning here for her bookworm grandson. She gave me her own copy of *The Autobiography*, heavily underlined. She pushed me to understand literature not just as exciting stories and pretty words, but as a guide to the thickets of the human mind – a way to develop understanding of the diversity of human character and the complexity of human minds.

My grandmother taught me to read literature not only as something pleasurable in itself, but as an education in the possibilities of the human mind. Trapped in our own minds and bodies, how else can we understand other minds and hearts – ever develop any real sympathy with any other human soul?

As my grandmother entered her 90s, her body increasingly failed her – but her mind and spirit remained undimmed. This woman, so sensitive to every other emotion, utterly barricaded herself against fear. Her last days

were a triumph of the human spirit over the dread of the unknown.

On March 20, only seven days before her death, she sent one of her very last e-mails to a former student who'd made contact with her:

"I neglected to tell you that on most days I am more 'out' of it than in it. Only a trip to the emergency room gets me out of my apartment. The right-arm fracture last June has led me to -- and maybe eventually it will be through -- a long and seemingly endless dark tunnel. I am stabilized now and totally happy on a shelf-ful of medicines for heart, for blood-thinning and for a broad range of other assorted so-called treatments. Mostly, I am low on energy, and focusing even on e-mailing is at times somewhat difficult. I tell you this only to explain why my responses to you are fewer, and certainly shorter, than I would like them to be.

"91 and a half is a good number to sit back on. I have the happiness of a great many blessings and even a respectable few laurels to relax on. That is mostly what I do these days ... a lot of rocking and staring and sniffing laurels. I must tell you that having found you again ... is a terrific boost to my psychic health. I don't do anything more physical nowadays than watch a little television, read a little, a very little as it happens. I am on Proust's Remembrance at last, having put it aside regretfully for lo these many years. Now that I'm about 250 pages into it, I think it is the best novel I have ever read, which includes those by Joyce, Melville, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. Oh well, if not the best, then at least I give it a front-row seat among those others. Only Joyce's Portrait may be my absolute favourite, of course.

"I hope you are well and enjoying these best years of your life. They get better and better from where you are now to where I am now. After 90 is the very best, of course."

I believe her. And I hope that this very imperfect student of the greatest teacher I've ever known will show before the end that I've at last learned her lesson in full.

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