

Celebration of Life



Adrienne Najarian Rabkin

February 25, 1929 – November 22, 2022

January 15, 2023 at the Charles Hotel, Cambridge

Program

Piano Sonata in C Major by Baldassare Galuppi

performed by

Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli

in 1962 in Torino, Italy

Memories and Thoughts

Julia Rabkin

David Rabkin

Rhoda Mann

Joshua Nolan

Alexis Rabkin

Mitch Rabkin

Julia

My brother David and I got lucky in the parent department. It is a blessing to feel loved and cared for, and we have been blessed in that way all our lives. One of my oldest memories is from sometime in the early 60's – listening to Mommy playing Schubert or Chopin on the piano as I drift off to sleep upstairs, all tucked up in my bed. The music was beautiful but, more than that, it made me feel safe and cozy because her presence was audible.

The last words I heard my mother speak were “It’s so wonderful”. She was reacting to a jazz piano piece to which we were listening. Years before, Mommy had introduced the music of brilliant jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams to my brother. David thought that Mommy would enjoy hearing some jazz and so was playing a Williams album on his iPad as we sat with her at Newbridge. She was clearly moved by the music, but I believe the words “it’s so wonderful” perfectly express her attitude towards the world around her. She approached people, places, and ideas with curiosity and intelligence and warmth.

It's not that she only had nice things to say. She had strong opinions, not all positive, but she was never mean or deliberately unkind and did not often use words with a strongly negative connotation. But on one occasion she did. Although I could share stories that illustrate her ability to ask insightful and thought-provoking questions, instead I am going to share a different kind of story with you that exemplifies her impeccable choice of words.

One evening, about 40 plus years ago, my mother and I were on our own for dinner. I convinced her (undoubtedly against her better judgment) that we should try a Chinese fast food joint that had recently opened near our Milton house. I mean – how bad could it be? Support small local businesses, right? So we hopped in the car, drove to the new place, and placed our order. Immediately upon receiving our unappetizing food, my heart sank. I knew I had made a bad choice. But since I had nudged Mommy into trying this place, I had to present an enthusiastic front.

We started our meal chatting away happily, but the nastiness of the greenish glop on our plates wore us down into near silence. We eventually gave up, disposed of the remnants of our sad sad meal, and got back into the car – in complete silence. I already had gas pains from the excess of cabbage in our dinner. As we drove home, my mother uttered the following words: That. Was. Repulsive. Truer words were never spoken – and they still make me laugh, 40 years later.

She was someone I wanted my friends to know – and to this day, I have friends from long ago school days who tell me how much they loved sitting around our kitchen table talking with my mother. She asked great questions, and listened to the answers.

She made a meaningful difference outside our home as well – as a social worker, a friend, a volunteer. I'm currently volunteering at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in the same department in the same role that she so ably filled a number of years ago. When nurses in that unit realized that I was my parents' daughter, they enthusiastically told me how wonderful Mommy was as a volunteer and how wonderful both my parents are. That makes me so proud.

I am grateful to be surrounded by expressions of her creativity and love. She is, of course, forever in our hearts – but tangible reminders are everywhere: in the beautiful pillows on our sofa that she needlepointed so skillfully, in the afghan that she made that I wrap myself in when I'm cold, in the beautiful quilts that she hand stitched, in the many gorgeous sweaters that she knitted for me and other family members, in the delicate handkerchiefs that she picked out for me on her travels, in the checked button down shirts that she gave annually to the men in our family (even when they begged “no more shirts please”), and in the recipes that she passed on to us – like her Thanksgiving yams, chocolate mint brownies, rice pilaf, and spaghetti sauce, which she had learned from her friend Roberta David, and which remains my favorite meat sauce of all time. She was a great cook! Even certain foods remind me of her – a juicy grapefruit, for example, or egg salad, or dark chocolate pecan caramel turtles. Every time I eat a fried egg, I am reminded of just how much she loved the fried egg and toast that Daddy would lovingly cook for her each morning.

I continue to hear my mother's voice. I distinctly remember conversations that she and I had in which she asked me thoughtful and incisive questions about issues with which I was struggling at the time. Her questions helped me understand myself better. I'm quite sure that I will apply a “what would Mommy say?” filter to future situations. I think of her every day, but everywhere I look I see the many gifts that she left with us.

Her memory is indeed a blessing.



*Adrienne, we think at, or soon after, college
(This slide just happened to be displayed as Julia said “a blessing.”)*

David

We all knew that someday today would come. And for a long time, we all wondered, what would Adrienne have wanted. What would she want shared in this ceremony?

Because Patty had struggled with this question before with both her parents, and because speaking with her mom about it had been helpful to her and her sisters, she was persistent in her inquiry.

Her effort produced only one piece of information: My mom wanted us to play the piano sonata that we just heard. That's it.

As it turns out, though, that tidbit of information reveals a great deal about my mother.

For example, it demonstrates her remarkable memory. For all kinds of things – people's faces, not necessarily their names but what they said and what they were going through. Newspaper and magazine article. "That reminds me of a piece in the New Yorker. It might have been in the spring of 1982. It was written by a young woman, and I think she may have been Iranian."

Julia mentioned earlier that her friends recognized that conversations with our mom were different. She asked real questions, listened, and remembered. My friends felt the same way.

Mommy listened carefully to music, too. She remembered composers, music, performers, and specific performances.

It's no surprise then, that a composer's fame wouldn't affect her recall. It's not surprising that she chose music for us today by a composer that almost nobody – as far as I can tell – has heard of. Galuppi? Let's face it, Baldassare Galuppi sounds like the punch line in one of my father's jokes.

But my mom heard and remembered this music, filed it away in the "this is very good music" category, and pulled it out just for us.

Let's go a little deeper – the fact that it's a sonata in C major. C major for chop sticks, right? For happy birthday. Who picks C major? Okay, who picks C major once they're more than 6 years old? G flat minor, even E major, can be serious music. But not C major.

Of course, that's not what mattered to her. She was knowledgeable, highly critical, and yet unpretentious. When she heard excellence, what others might think, about the key, about the composer, about anything beyond the substance itself... that just didn't matter.

She valued excellence – beauty, craftsmanship, artistry, design.

She also enjoyed sharing these things with others. In today's case, it's a wonderful piece of music. That makes a lot of sense. Music was part of her relationship with many people, particularly with me.

For years, my parents had a subscription to symphony. And sometimes, when they couldn't make it, they'd offer me their tickets. Occasionally, though, it didn't come in the form of an offer; it came as a directive. These orders always came from my mom. She'd tell me that it was time to drop everything and go to symphony. "Homework? Oh, you'll get it done. Ina Haendel performing Beethoven's Violin Concerto is simply not to be missed."

That's the one I remember best. And, of course, she was right. I feel lucky to this day that I was in Symphony Hall at that particular moment to experience that magical performance. I can still conjure up what it felt like. Mommy knew that feeling, and I'm pretty sure she felt it along with me, even though she wasn't at the performance.

I want to give you a bit more of that feeling now. And to do it, I'm going to build on the story Julia told about Mommy's last words. Let me play the music that goes with it.

(Start the album's second track, "Baby Man, Take 2")

Let's go back about two months, to the Saturday before my mother died. Mommy had very little strength. She could hardly speak, and she spent most of the time with her eyes closed. Julia had been with her all morning, and when I arrived, they were listening to music by a kinda new-agey kinda Flamenco guitarist who my mom really liked. When it ended, I put on my mom's favorite Mary Lou Williams album – what we're listening to now. Mommy introduced me to this music when I was very young, and this is probably my favorite record of all time.

We listened to the first song, and then the one we hear now came on.

(Wait until a bit into the first solo ...)

Somewhere around here in the song, Mommy just burst into tears. It was pretty alarming, actually. Julia and I both jumped to attention but didn't know what to do. Julia pretty much hollered "What's wrong? Tell us what's wrong?"

Mommy slowly shook her head, gestured with her hand, and said, "No." Then she clarified with the words: "It's so wonderful."

Her last truly coherent words to us were a declaration of the joy of listening to beautiful music, the joy of sharing it with us, and – if I extrapolate just a bit – the joy of living.

There's so much more to say. Some is captured in the remarks made at the memorial we held right after Mommy died. You can find it on the website listed in your program.

All I'll add now is that my mom was eminently sane and incredibly well-balanced emotionally. She was a great partner with and for my dad. She was critical and discerning when it came to people, but that was coupled with insight, understanding and gentleness. And as you may have noticed from the photos, she was warm, and she smiled a lot.

For now, that's enough. I want to end with blessing and a wish: May we all learn the lessons to be found in my mom's love of, and engagement with, life, and the fact that she so loved sharing it with all of us.



With family and friends on a trip to France in 2003 (slide displayed as David finished)

Rhoda

Unfortunately, Rhoda was ill and unable to join us. She spoke at the memorial we held for Adrienne on November 29, 2022, and those remarks are captured on the video from that day.



Rhoda at left, with Ann, Margaret and Adrienne in the late 1940s or early 1950s

Joshua

Adrienne and I go way back. She first met me back in 1996...note that SHE first met ME, because, well, I had just been born. She knew me before I could open my eyes, before I could comprehend the concept of consciousness. Yet from my earliest moments, I was loved by her. I say this because it shows, in the barest way possible, who she was at her core: she loved. I was a baby, with no way to love her back, and yet she loved me still. As the very definition of unconditional, loving no matter what, this love continued throughout my life, until the very end, and beyond. But grandma also loved so very many things. Music, art, reading, knitting, food, talking, hanging out, being with family: all things she did, all things she imbued with joy and heartfelt compassion.

Many of my earliest memories are from time spent at 124 Canton Ave. in Milton, where Grandma and Grandpa lived happily together for many years. Sitting at the piano with Grandma, playing four-hand piano duets, the smiles and camaraderie that we shared. Sitting in the kitchen while she baked and cooked, playing with little wind-up toys on the kitchen table to pass the time. Lounging with her while she knitted socks, or a sweater, or a vest, one of which I proudly wear today. Looking back now, everything she did, she did with love.

I remember one specific memory. Alexis and I were quite young, and we went over to Grandma and Grandpa's house for a sleepover. We had our own little bathroom, our own little room, with our twin beds and an old knob-tuned TV. But what I remember most about this visit was taking a hot shower, stepping out to dry myself off, and seeing that Grandma had left me her large, white, fluffy, long bath robe for me to wear. I can remember very vividly putting it on and feeling like I was wrapped up in a big fluffy hug. I am not aware of this moment altering the course of my life in a significant way. But what the memory embodies for me - and why it has stuck with me for all these years - is it shows in a metaphorical way who my grandma was - to me, to my sister, to everybody in this room. She was a big, fluffy white robe that I could wrap myself up inside of and feel warm and safe and comforted whenever I was with her. She is an embodiment of love.

It's hard to be here today, because as I've done for a while now, I keep telling myself that she's not really gone, just out of reach. For quite a while before she passed away, that was true. She was just out of reach, and couldn't make it to the family dinner, or she was in the hospital, recovering from a broken bone, just out of reach, or she was recovering from a case of covid, just out of reach of a visit. But now that she is truly gone, it's hard to convince myself it's true, when everything feels so similar to how it was before, when she was just out of reach

Yet, things are different. Things are a little bit off. At Christmas this year, I lacked a particular warm embrace. Her happy, soulful laugh filling the air was missed. But her love, her unconditional love, is what is missing the most.

I wish I had had more time. I wish I had spent more time with her over the years. I wish I had visited more often, read more of the books she recommended, sang and danced and played piano just a little more, because she loved it. I wish I had told her I love you just one more time. But she knew all this. Nobody's perfect, and even if I had spent more time with her and done all

these things, I would be standing here in front of you, saying the exact same words. And that's the thing: I would never have been able to spend too much time with her, because there was no such thing. She was comforting, and any amount of time spent with her felt like just the right amount.

I could leave you all with some grandiose parting words about making the world a better place, but I don't think we're all prepared to tackle such an issue. So instead, I want to ask you for something smaller: don't forget to smile. My grandma cared about a great many things in life, but just as importantly, she found joy in everything. If something made me happy, and she could see that I was happy, even if she didn't quite understand or appreciate it, she would smile. Her smile was warm, bright, and caring, and could warm you even on the coldest day. So please, I ask you, smile more. Life may bring trouble and strife, with no end in sight, but this world we live in is so incredibly beautiful. Grandma lived this truth, and found something to smile about every day. Even at the end of her life, when she was suffering through pain and fatigue, she found the energy to smile at us when we visited. That smile meant the world to us, and I think that she knew it. If all of us could just smile a little more, and seek out joy wherever we are, maybe, just maybe, we might be able to make the world a better place.

I know Grandma made my world better, and I hope that I can honor her by doing the same for those I love.



Adrienne with Josh in S. Dartmouth, summer 1996 (displayed just as Josh finished)

Alexis

For my bat mitzvah, my grandmother insisted on taking me shopping to find the right dress. I had gone with my mom and nothing felt quite right, so my grandmother decided to take charge of the operation. We went to a few stores and over the day I saw her getting increasingly frustrated by the lack of quality dresses and the enormous price tags attached to said poor quality dresses. At a certain point, she turned to me and said, "I could make a dress nicer than this." She tried really hard to play this off as a casual side comment that she wasn't thinking too much about and I continued trying on a couple more dresses, but we both knew in that moment exactly what was going to happen.

Josh and I have been incredibly lucky to have had Adrienne as our grandmother. My experience as Adrienne's grandchild was one of pure unconditional love. She was the type of grandmother who would hand sew my bat mitzvah dress because she wasn't satisfied with other options. Our home is full of pillows that she needlepointed and sweaters that she knit. She would take us to performances and art galleries starting at ages where we had no conception of how fortunate we were to have those experiences. Whenever we had a piano recital, or nutcracker performance, or dance show, regardless of how brief our appearance was or how many notes we'd mess up, our grandmother would be there to watch us and tell us how proud she was. Because of her, there has never been a moment in my life where I have doubted whether I am loved.

That's not to say that she never expressed disappointment. She was so appalled with our manners when we were younger that she sent us to a Harvard manners course. Every time she asked what I was reading and I wasn't in the middle of a book since I wasn't a big reader, I would get a mini lecture. She shunned me for dressing up my cats who clearly hated it and told me to treat them better. She certainly voiced her confusion and at times contempt for my fashion choices, especially during the era where I almost exclusively wore leggings instead of real pants, and she told me flat out that she would be disappointed if I got my nose pierced. But then I got my nose pierced anyway, and, once she finally noticed over a month later, she asked to see it and complimented the gem choice. When I was walking out of a restaurant after a family dinner wearing leggings and a cropped sweater, she asked about the difference between leggings and yoga pants and even told me "Hey, good legs!" I would occasionally tell her about the bachelor, and even though she never understood why I watched that show, she laughed at the ridiculousness of it and sometimes even asked follow-up questions. When she expressed her disappointment and frustration, it was always clear that it came from a place of love.

I loved my grandmother so much. Her laughs were infectious. She was so incredibly talented and artistic. She always said "to-mah-to" instead of tomato. She was patient and kind, even when others were not. She had a warmth that emitted from her that always made me feel safe. She managed to find joy all around her, and taught me how to find it too. Whether it was spotting a small bird, having a bite of a really good dessert, petting a soft cat, or seeing the first spring blooms; I learned how to love and appreciate tiny moments that are often neglected. There are some people whose love and joy for life is felt every time you're with them, and Adrienne was one of those incredibly special people.

I'll finish by sharing one of my earliest memories of my grandmother and one of my last. One of my earliest memories with her, I must've been around 4 or 5. My parents had left me and Josh with my grandparents in Dartmouth and I was sobbing having a full melt down. My grandmother asked me why I was so upset, and I told her that I missed my mom. She replied: "I miss my mommy too." This was one of the first lessons in empathy that I ever received. Her vulnerability in that moment forced me to see her as a full human being who had a mother and experienced loss and think beyond myself and my feelings. There is a power in vulnerability and an art in empathy, and she conveyed that to me starting at an age before I could even read.

On one of the last days of her life, she was still present, though opening her eyes and talking took a lot of strain for her. My dad and I were getting ready to leave and my dad told her to open her eyes and look at me, telling her I was wearing the coat she bought me last year. She opened her eyes, took one look at me, and said "you need to wear it with the scarf I made you." I find it fitting that one of the last full sentences she said to me was instructing me on how to dress.

Empathy, style, and joy. She tried to teach me how to balance those three throughout my entire life. I'd like to think that she succeeded.



Adrienne's 80th birthday party, February 25, 2009

Mitch

Along with fond recollections, this celebration of Adrienne's time with us has included a bit of humor. I recall one incident, never shared before. I was heading to New York City on a Thursday evening for a medical meeting the following morning. Adrienne planned to travel there on Friday; we would enjoy the weekend together. Then she changed her mind and accompanied me on Thursday. At the end of that evening, we got into bed at the hotel. Shortly, Adrienne said, "There's something down by my foot." Reaching down, she extracted a tiny bikini — in leopard spots. Holding it up, and eyeing me, she announced, "You are very lucky." "Why?" I asked. Her reply, "If I had come down tomorrow, you would have had a hell of a lot of explaining to do!"

Julia, David, Alexis and Joshua have shared memories of Adrienne – her knowledge, talents, affability, sensitivity to others, invariable good mood. Rhoda Mann, her friend since college days, is ill and unable to join us.

I'll start at our beginning. In 1953 we met, both employed in a psychological project that turned out to be useless – except for us. The first few years of our relationship were challenging. More roundly educated than I, and more mature, Adrienne was sure where the relationship should head; I vacillated. Some of my hesitancy related to pressure from my family, whose teeth were on edge – What!! Marrying a non-Jew? Her family welcomed me but the tension from mine persisted, even to our wedding day. But Adrienne, rightly frustrated, did not hold a grudge. Some months after our wedding, we moved to my role at NIH. My father, a patent attorney, occasionally came to the U S Patent Office in Washington. Staying with us in Bethesda, occasionally he and Adrienne had quiet time together. With no resentment, her warm conversation with him helped heal his longstanding grief over the death of his wife, my mother, at her age of 34. Adrienne was the only one with whom he felt he could truly share his sorrow; their relationship changed. Not yet a social worker, she already had skills and sensitivity that brought her close to him and so many others.

There was no artifice. Adrienne did not play mind games. I cannot think of a hostile thought she ever voiced. What you heard, what you saw, was what you got -- no hidden motives, always thoughtful, sensitive, open and honest – a good friend. I remember her as wife, lover, partner, colleague, role model, mentor and very special friend. Adrienne enriched my life, that of her family and friends. We miss her but continue to savor the many rich times and memories so generously she gave us.



Adrienne and Mitch's 50th wedding anniversary, June 24, 2006